

# THE 1909 MURDER CASE OF JACK BLACKBURN

By Kenneth Bridgham



“Battling Nelson, Jem Driscoll or even Terry McGovern in his palmiest days could not compare with the marvelous speed and ability of the shifty Blackburn. In the ring he is an elusive shadow, as hard to reach as a flying feather. His ability to administer the knock-out punch has been demonstrated a hundred times.... In the last few weeks, the Western coast clubs have been after him, offering him an exorbitant sum to box there. An English syndicate last week offered him a large sum to go to England and fight. With these prospects, the rosy path to fortune looked wide to him, and boxing enthusiasts all over the country were glad to hear that at last one of the greatest boxers that ever trod the boards was to come into his own.”

These effusive words about the terrific lightweight contender Jack Blackburn from the January 14, 1909 edition of the *Camden Morning Post* sound as though they are announcing the culmination of a stellar career to the heights of glory. They are not. Instead, they accompany the report of a violent crime that would end the life of one man, wound two women, and severely derail Blackburn’s career, confining him to a prison cell for the duration of his physical prime. An altercation in the streets of Philadelphia in the early morning hours of Tuesday, January 12 led to gunshots, bloodshed, and the arrest and conviction of one of the best boxers in the world for murder. So, what exactly happened? How and why did Blackburn end up a killer?

His story begins on May 3, 1883, with his birth in Versailles, Kentucky as Charles Henry Blackburn. As best as records of the time can detail, he was the last of eight children, including three older sisters (Lille, Eva, and Alice) and four older brothers (William, George, John, and Fred). He and his siblings, who all shared the last name Blackburn, appear to have been raised by Louis Henry Redd and Hellen Redd, who were both in their twenties at the time of Jack’s birth, though the biological relationship between the Blackburns and the Redds is unclear. The

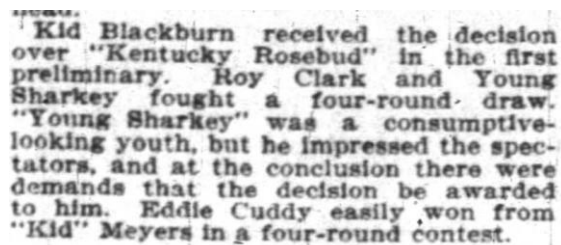
eldest among Jack's siblings were already teenagers, precluding Louis and Hellen from being their parents.

According to Nat Fleishcher, who was a contemporary of Blackburn's, saw him fight, and knew him personally, Louis Henry Redd was a preacher and "wanted him to study for the ministry, but Jack was a lad who liked outdoor life, was very fond of fishing, baseball and boxing," and thus disappointed his adoptive father's dream.

By his late teens, Jack left the Redds behind in Kentucky and moved to Indiana with his brothers George and Fred. Early on, Jack worked as a bootblack, but all three brothers enjoyed boxing, and both Jack and Fred fell under the tutelage and management of another prizefighter, a Kentuckian named Jim Watts. Jack and Fred often trained together, and they usually fought on the same fight cards in the early years.

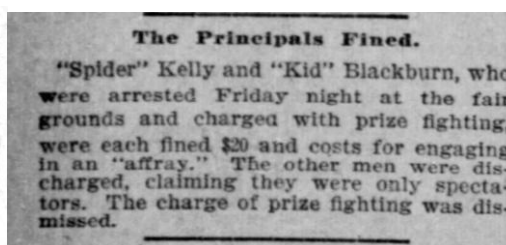
As the new century dawned, young Jack Blackburn embarked upon his career in the dangerous and illicit world of prizefighting. He stood approximately five feet, ten inches tall, much taller than the average lightweight of his day. He quickly developed a fighting style that took advantage of his superior height and reach, one which relied primarily upon straight punches, even when fighting on the inside, as this was the quickest way to get his blows to their mark.

As is the case with so many of the ring's stars of this time, Jack's ring record is woefully incomplete. Many of his early ventures into competitive and paid boxing are lost to history, going unrecorded at a time when the sport was largely underground. Fleischer tells us that the young, poor, and starving fighter "obtained a little work at stags and in vaudeville with an occasional preliminary bout to enable him to keep the wolf from the door." This author found no extant records of the dates, venues, opponents, or results of Jack's appearances in these shows. Once his ring career was through, Blackburn himself would claim that he had taken part in more than 400 bouts, a number far exceeding any modern accounting of his career.



Kid Blackburn received the decision over "Kentucky Rosebud" in the first preliminary. Roy Clark and Young Sharkey fought a four-round draw. "Young Sharkey" was a consumptive-looking youth, but he impressed the spectators, and at the conclusion there were demands that the decision be awarded to him. Eddie Cuddy easily won from "Kid" Meyers in a four-round contest.

*Indianapolis News* June 16, 1900



**The Principals Fined.**  
"Spider" Kelly and "Kid" Blackburn, who were arrested Friday night at the fair grounds and charged with prize fighting, were each fined \$20 and costs for engaging in an "affray." The other men were discharged, claiming they were only spectators. The charge of prize fighting was dismissed.

*Indianapolis Journal* February 24, 1901

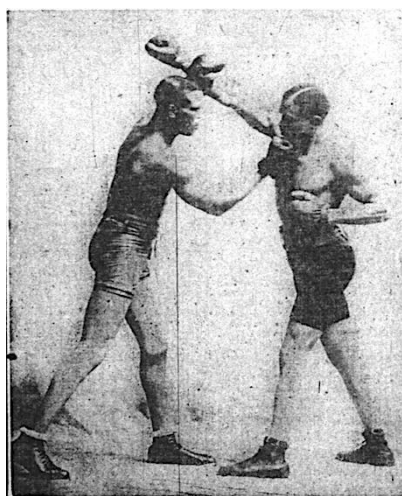
Fighting as Kid Blackburn, Jack's earliest verifiable bouts came in Indiana around 1900. Within his first year as a pro, the relative novice had already impressed many by getting in the ring with the likes of veteran contender Kentucky Rosebud and former bantamweight champ Spider Kelly. Neither fight is recorded at either BoxRec or Cyber Boxing Zone. The Charles Blackburn listed by BoxRec as fighting Rosebud on June 10, 1900 is also likely Jack. He beat Rosebud, but the fight with Kelly was stopped by police before the end of the first round. In 1901 and 1902, Blackburn held Indiana State lightweight champion Jack Cullen to two draws before heading first to Pittsburgh and then to Philadelphia in search of more lucrative fights. It worked. He was brought to the attention of Philadelphia sportswriter Dick Cain, who became

his manager and set him on a path to greatness. Between November and December of 1903, he battled the future legends Joe Gans (ND 6) and Sam Langford (D 12), not to mention perennial contender Dave Holly (ND 6) and future welterweight champion Mike "Twin" Sullivan (D 15).

Over the coming years, he would fight Gans, Langford, and Holly multiple times each, always giving them as much as they could handle. Blackburn was said to have dominated his first fight with future heavyweight great Langford. "I never cared what they weighed. As long as they had two hands," he once quipped. His only losses in this first half of his career were decisions dropped to Gans and Langford, even though he regularly took on men above his weight class for worthwhile paydays. He worked as a sparring partner for Jack Johnson, and the story goes that Blackburn so embarrassed the heavyweight champion in sparring that it was the source of the bad blood that existed between both men for the rest of their lives." Blackburn stabbed Johnson repeatedly in the mouth with his left, and the latter did not relish it at all," one paper related.

Blackburn gave the popular light heavyweight champion of the world Philadelphia Jack O'Brien hell in a June 10, 1908 showdown between Philly greats. O'Brien outweighed him by fourteen and a half pounds. The Blackburn-O'Brien non-title bout was a no-decision affair in accordance with the laws of Pennsylvania at the time. But Blackburn did so well that the eyes of the boxing world were on him in 1909. Even so, the fighter himself was beginning to unravel.

Despite the acclaim his performances against men like Gans, Langford, and O'Brien bought him, Jack was without a lucrative championship, or even a shot at one. There were offers of bouts on the West coast or England, sure, but not one of them were a shot at a championship, which he felt he deserved. Gans, O'Brien, and Sullivan might be willing to take him on in nontitle bouts, but never would they consent to risking their championships against him. Ditto for middleweight champion Stanley Ketchel. At twenty-five years old, he was entering his prime, yet it seemed it would pass him by without ever seeing a champion's acclaim or pay.



*Jack (left), and Fred Blackburn*

Disillusioned and bitter, Jack turned to the bottle. He would later remember this as a period of his life spent in bars drinking and resisting the temptation to murder "wise guys" who bothered him. Eventually, the temptation became too great. To say that he was an angry drunk would be a lethal understatement. "He was a bad guy. He used to get drunk and have fights," legendary trainer Ray Arcel once remembered of him. "A lot of people were afraid of Blackburn," Joe Gramby, a boxer later trained by Blackburn, said. "He was a nice person, but when he was drinking, he was hell." On December 29, following his four-round no-decision bout with Harry Mansfield, an inebriated Jack got into an argument with his brother Fred over Maude Pillion, Jack's common-law wife. Jack received a knife wound stretching from his left ear all the way down to his mouth in the brawl that followed. Fred later told the papers that the cut was only an accident that occurred when the brothers were goofing around.

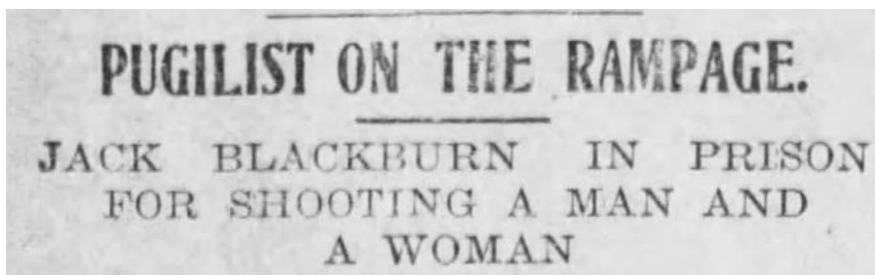
Twenty-one stitches and two weeks later, Jack was drunk again and in a surly mood. At approximately three in the morning, a private security guard watched Jack and Maude exit a cab on a nearby side-street and walk around the corner to 216 South Jessup Street in Philly, the home of Alonzo and Mattie Polk. Jack and Maude had been having an ongoing feud with Alonzo and Mattie. The Polks were still awake, as was Helen Chesney, a twenty-year-old woman who was visiting the Polks when they heard a knock on the door.

Mattie opened the door to see an enraged Maude Pillion. As Chesney later testified, "A foul name passed, Mrs. Polk hit Maude Pillion over the head with a paving brick." Here the brawl apparently spilled out onto the front lawn of the Polks' home. "Maude Pillion drew a knife, and was attempting to stab Mrs. Polk, when Alonzo Polk ran out of the house and jumped into the fight," continued Chesney. "At this Blackburn drew his revolver from his pocket and started shooting."

Alonzo Polk caught three bullets, two in the neck and one the abdomen. His wife was shot in the back between her shoulder blades, the bullet passing through her lungs. He even (accidentally, one presumes) shot Maude Pillion as well. Lucky for her, the bullet only grazed her forehead.

At least that was how Helen Chesney saw it, and her story was mostly corroborated by the testimony of Hattie Spencer, the Polks' neighbor at the inquest. William H. Dorsey, another witness to the affray, testified that Mattie Polk struck Maude Pillion with a bottle and then handed her revolver to her husband. Alonzo then shot Maude, at which point Jack drew his own pistol and shot both Polks.

Whatever the specifics of who shot who, people immediately came out of their homes at the commotion and gathered around the scene. They all saw Jack Blackburn standing over his victims in a "bewildered" state. An Officer Dicks heard the gunshots from nearby and rushed to the scene. Once Jack caught sight of the policeman, he tried to bolt, but Dicks ran him down and clubbed him unconscious.



*Allentown Leader January 14, 1909*

Six policemen carried Mattie Polk to Jefferson Hospital while Alonzo Polk and Maude Pillion were taken via cab to Jefferson. All three were awake upon arrival, though both Polks were judged by the physicians to be in mortal danger. The Polks told the police that Jack was the man who shot them, and he was locked up at a nearby police station. A few hours later, a magistrate committed him to Moyamensing Prison pending trial without bail, and Maude Pillion was released on \$1,000 bail, charged with assault and battery. She visited Jack in prison while he awaited trial.

On Friday, January 15, Alonzo Polk died of his wounds, and Jack Blackburn was charged with first-degree murder. As Polk was well liked by many in his community, his funeral was reported as “one of the largest ever held by Philadelphia Negroes.” Mattie’s condition was so fragile that she was not notified of her husband’s passing until after her condition stabilized. She later made a full recovery from her wound. Meanwhile, the *Pittsburgh Press* reported that Jack “lies an inconsolable wreck... Blackburn, now sober, is beginning to realize the seriousness of his position.”

The coroner’s inquest took place on or around January 22. Jack and Maude corroborated William Dorsey’s story that it was Alonzo Dorsey who shot Maude, and that they were only defending themselves from attack by the Dorseys. After hearing their testimony and those of Helen Chesney, Hattie Spencer, Officer Dicks, and Coroner Ford, the jury returned a verdict confirming that Alonzo Dorsey was killed by a gunshot wound from the revolver of Jack Blackburn, a fact that no one had disputed. The accused was then escorted in cuffs from the Coroner’s Court to a cell at City Hall to await a return to Moyamensing. Reporters wrote that he looked “More like a victorious gladiator returning than a prisoner charged with homicide, and escorted by a great troop of white and black admirers.”

On February 1, newspapers around the country began to print rumors that Jack had attempted suicide the prior day with a poison passed to him during a visit by Pillion, a rumor that prison officials refused to confirm or deny. For her part, Maude said they were untrue, adding that, “\*Jack+ is not worrying much about his trial.” He planned to plead self-defense.

Between the months of February and June, some of Jack’s fans and fellow pugilists began putting on benefits in New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia for his legal defense. Sam Langford organized some of these, and Joe Gans appeared at a couple in Philly.

By mid-May, as Jack’s case had still not come to trial, a judge granted him release on \$3,000 bail. The trial finally began on Monday, June 28, and Jack initially plead not guilty by reason of self-defense, as expected. However, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, during the first two days of trial, “it was seen that the testimony against Blackburn was getting stronger with every witness called by the Commonwealth, while on the other hand the testimony of the few witnesses for the defense did not seem to be of a very weighty character.” Come Wednesday, June 30, Jack and his attorney Samuel Salus worked out a bargain with Assistant District Attorney Joseph Taulane, and the defense changed its plea to guilty of the charges of second degree murder and attempted murder.

Salus then set about arguing for leniency in sentencing for his client. He put the blame of the events on Maude Pillion, insisting that Jack would not have been in the situation had it not been for her. He also pointed out that even the lightest allowable prison sentence for second degree murder would end Blackburn’s boxing career, “and this in itself would be no light punishment.” Judge Carr of the Court of Oyer and Termeter sentenced Jack Blackburn to fifteen years in prison. He was then transported to Eastern penitentiary to serve his term.

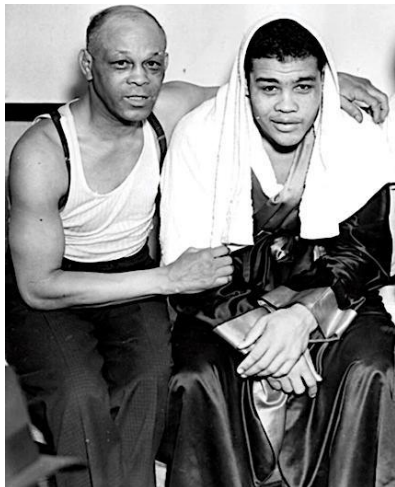
The results of the charges against Maude Pillion for assault and battery were not reported by the papers, but in 1910 she was sentenced to a year in prison for running a brothel, so if she served any time in prison in 1909, it must have been brief.

# “JACK” BLACKBURN GUILTY OF MURDER

*Philadelphia Inquirer June 30, 1909*

According to Fleischer, Blackburn “was a model prisoner and with the aid of an army of friends, including Booker T. Washington, great Negro educator, the sentence was lowered and at the end of four years and eight months, he was paroled because of his good behavior.” It could not have hurt that Jack befriended the warden and gave his family boxing lessons, or so rumor had it.

On Tuesday, January 13, 1914, five years and one day after the shooting incident, Jack Blackburn walked out of Eastern penitentiary a free man. He told reporters that he was going to continue his boxing career, and that he intended to sail for Paris and challenge Jack Johnson to a fight for the heavyweight title. Johnson was in exile in Europe at the time due to his own legal difficulties in the States. Blackburn never went to Paris and never got the shot at Johnson, but he did return to the ring. Now a rusty thirty-year-old middleweight, he was still a good fighter, but nowhere near the world-beating marvel he had once been. Promoted as “THE MAN WHO CAME BACK,” he fought on for another nine years, battling Gunboat Smith, Harry Greb, and Panama Joe Gans before retiring in 1923.



*Blackburn (left) and his most famous pupil, Joe Louis.*

Fleischer wrote that Blackburn emerged from prison a “new man” who had learned self-control. This was far from the truth. He was as bitter and resentful as ever and continued to gravitate toward violence and alcohol. He did achieve great success as a boxing trainer with champions like Bud Taylor and Sammy Mandell. Most famously, he became a father-figure to Joe Louis, one of the few loving and trusting relationships Jack managed to maintain in his life. Even during his rewarding tenure with the Brown Bomber, he continued to terrify many who knew him and get into trouble. In 1935, he was charged in another shooting death following an argument in Chicago with one Enoch Hauser. A little girl was shot as well, though she survived. Somehow, newspapers blacked out the trial and the charges were eventually dropped, causing many to suspect that Louis’s well-connected backers may have used their influence to get Blackburn off.

In a Chicago hospital with pneumonia, Charles “Jack” Blackburn died on April 24, 1942, leaving behind one of the most complicated legacies in boxing history. He was fifty-nine but looked decades older, his body ravaged by the hard luck, hard fighting, hard living, and hard time that made up his life.