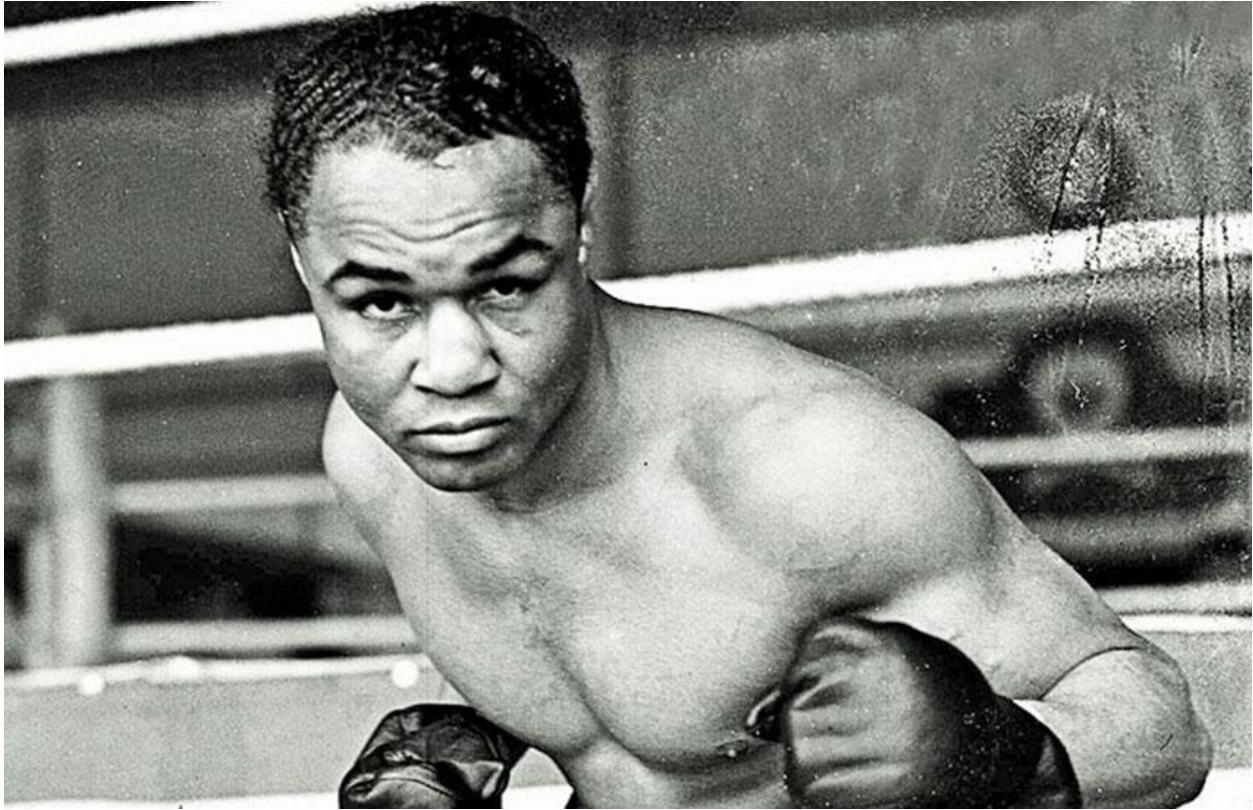


Henry Armstrong's Las Vegas Episode: A Dip into the Pool of Tank Town Boxing

By [Arne K. Lang](#)



Henry Armstrong, active from 1931 to 1945, won the featherweight, welterweight, and lightweight world titles, in that order, in a day when there were only eight widely recognized weight classes. He briefly held all three belts simultaneously. During the course of his career he had a run of 27 straight knockouts and, in October of 1939, successfully defended his welterweight title five times in a span of 22 days. On all-time pound-for-pound lists, Hammerin' Hank is commonly placed second behind only Sugar Ray Robinson.

Armstrong also had the distinction of being the first ring immortal to appear in a Las Vegas ring when he fought Irish Johnny Taylor at the Pittman Arena on Sept. 7, 1942. And yet, although he was already recognized as one of the all-time greats, his visit wasn't greeted with much fanfare. To the contrary, there were factions in the community that wanted to head him off at the pass and, failing that, run him out of town on a rail. Such were the foibles of tank town boxing. (The term "tank town" originated in the days of traveling vaudeville troupes. By definition a tank town is any town where the tallest

building is the municipal water tank, but the term came to have a broader and more cynical meaning, denoting a place where the locals were a bunch of rubes.)

Las Vegas in 1942 bore scant resemblance to modern Las Vegas. Las Vegas proper was home to about 14,000 people. The outlying areas in the Las Vegas valley were inhabited by perhaps another 20,000.

Boxing and wrestling shows were run under the auspices of the American Legion, a monopoly that prevailed in many other communities. The State Commander of the American Legion was A.E. Cahlan. A man with considerable clout in state politics, Cahlan also happened to own the Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, the town's only daily newspaper. His brother John F. Cahlan was the paper's sports editor. And for Henry Armstrong, therein lay the rub. The show on which Armstrong appeared was arranged by a maverick promoter. That made Team Armstrong a threat to the established order.

It's fun to leaf through the pages of tank town newspapers and read the reports of upcoming local boxing promotions. The stories often proved to be more thrilling than the fights.

The Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal was one of the worst offenders. The boxing shows at Legion Stadium, the cozy little wooden corral that sat behind the American Legion clubhouse, invariably featured sensational battlers who were certain to produce plenty of fireworks. The undercard matches would have been main events in larger precincts, or so it was written

Sports editor Cahlan laid the molasses on thick for the Aug. 19, 1942 show at Legion Stadium. The main event of the Wednesday card featured heavyweights George Gambastiani and Francisco De La Cruz.

“Those who have seen Gambastini (sic) in the ring report that he is the fastest big man they have ever seen. He steps around like a light-heavyweight and his footwork is that of a ballet dancer. De la Cruz...is reputed to have a nimble right cross that has laid plenty of lads low, and it has been through this medium that he has been able to build up an undefeated record while campaigning in Mexico....Los Angeles fight fans who were in Las Vegas over the weekend marveled at the fact that such a small town as Las Vegas has been able to get the match between the big boys. They contend that matchmakers all over the Pacific Coast, not alone in Los Angeles, have been trying to make this match.”

One would have thought that the six-foot-four Gambastiani and his paunchy opponent — a journeyman previously identified by Cahlan as the champion of Mexico — were worthy opponents for Joe Louis.