THE VIOLENT LIFE AND DEATH OF YANKEE SULLIVAN

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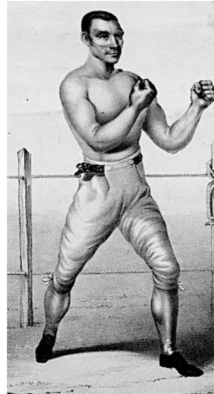

Saturday, May 31 1856, 8 AM: Bare knuckle boxing star Yankee Sullivan's corpse is found fully dressed and lying on its back, cold and pale on a small bed in a small, nondescript room in San Francisco, California, a pool of dried blood on the floor below. His right arm was nearly severed at the elbow, but neither the room nor the body showed signs of struggle. A dull pocketknife was discovered near the body.

Newspapers immediately reported his death as a suicide. But on the morning of his death and for several days before, Sullivan was being illegally held prisoner by a violet group of men who had recently lynched another man. Many people doubted the suicide verdict then, suspecting something far more nefarious; and the question remains today: How did Yankee Sullivan, once the most famous boxer in America, truly die?

The only part of Sullivan's life more shrouded in mystery than its end is its beginning. Those who did not call him Yankee Sullivan believed his real name was either James Ambrose or Frank Ambrose. Or Jim Sullivan. Or maybe Frank Murray. Possibly Frank Martin. Indeed, Sullivan used so many sobriquets that even the best researched sources differ as to his birth name, some giving Frank Ambrose and others James Ambrose. The dates given for his birth range from 1807 to 1813, but most sources agree that the location was Brandon, near County Cork, in Ireland.

The surviving accounts of Sullivan's life as a criminal jack-of-all-trades explain his need for so many false identities. According to legend, Sullivan was a part-time pugilist and full-time crook in his native land before the authorities shipped him off to Botany Bay, Australia in 1837. His crime was apparently theft or, according to some sources, the murder of his wife. Two years later he escaped as a stowaway on a ship bound for America, and from there made his way to England, where he resumed his boxing career and first began using the name Yankee as a reference to his brief foray stateside. After he proclaimed himself the champion middleweight of England, rumors that the police had finally discerned his true identity forced Sullivan to flee back across the Atlantic, where he settled in the predominantly Irish Five Points neighborhood of New York.

Once in New York, Sullivan opened a saloon called the Sawdust House at 9 Chatham Street in the Bowery district and found work as a "shoulder hitter," the period's term for thugs who did the bidding of politicians. Sullivan became one of the most feared members of the Spartans, a band of toughs who worked for Mike Walsh, a radical within the Democratic Party ranks who pushed for

working man's rights. When he wasn't running with the Spartans, Sullivan cracked heads in support of Matthew T. Brennan, an influential saloon keeper who also acted as the foreman of one of the neighborhood's several fire companies. Sullivan would often switch allegiances between the various political factions of the Five Points but remained a feared New York gangster into the early 1850s, regardless of which side he was on.

His reputation as a fearsome streetfighter quickly and brutally established after his arrival, Sullivan wasted no time in notifying the city sporting circles that he was willing to face the best boxers America had to offer. Englishman Vincent Hammond and native-born American Thomas Secor were both conquered. The Secor contest drew 2,000 spectators, probably more than any previous prize fight on American soil. His victories galvanized the sporting public and, as no one could think of a credible American fighter to best him, some Americans regarded him as the nation's first national boxing champion. He was "the adored hero and champion of all the Celts" in particular. "The largest cities and the largest states seemed not large enough for expressing the delight of Sullivan's enthusiastic admirers," alleged one effusive account. A few years later, one of the first published histories of boxing in the United States said that Sullivan "was looked up to on all sides, not only as a personage to be revered, but an oracle whose opinion was infallible and without appeal on the subjects connected with the Prize Ring."[1]

Like many sporting men, Sullivan was a drinker and, according to the *New York Times*, not a very good one. "Drink made Sullivan insane," claimed the newspaper. "When overcome by liquor, he was furious against everybody, never distinguishing friend from foe." However, even the *Times* admitted that "there was some good feeling, much overlaid by rascality and very difficult to be discerned." Sullivan also began the tradition of American boxing champions flaunting their money. Another early source who knew Sullivan personally gave an account of Sullivan's memorable look and dandy style as it contributed to his fame:

> Anyone who ever saw Jim Sullivan once could never forget him, and in every city he visited he became a conspicuous object of peculiar interest. His close-cropped, bullet-like head, not unlike the head of a ram, except the horns; fierce, glaring gray eyes; high cheek bones, flat face; reddish-brown hair, prominent ears and thick neck, made him the beau-ideal of a fighter. His close-fitting, bottle-green velvet cutaway coat, tight-legged corderoys [sic], high cut vest, spotted scarf and cluster diamond pin, protruding shirt collar and straight broad-brimmed plug hat, were decidedly Sullivan-like. He carried very little flesh, had a jaunty, springy, devil-may-care air, and when not in liquor was a clever sort of man, with an open heart for those not always too worthy…. [Sullivan] was never so happy as when he had on the mittens.[2]

In 1842, Sullivan narrowly avoided jail time for manslaughter after he acted as a second in a match that proved lethal for one of the combatants. It seems likely his work as a shoulder hitter earned him a pardon from newly elected Governor William C. Bouck. Bouck's lone provision, according to one source, was that Sullivan promise to engage in no more prize fights.

Public and political backlash over the ring death kept Sullivan out of the ring for a period of five years. He returned in 1847 to face English import Robert Caunt, brother to England's champion Ben

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[1] *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 12, 1860; Goran, *The Manly Art*, 71, quoting *American Fistiana*; Timony, 1; Fox, 7
[2] James, *The Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan*, 21; *New York Times*, June 30, 1856

Caunt. Governor Bouck had by that point been out of office for more than three years and America's most famous boxer felt no further obligation to keep his promise. Sullivan whipped Caunt in just twelve minutes, claiming a then enormous prize of $1,000.

The public presumed that Sullivan's days as a prize fighter were behind him, but he eventually agreed to the ring to face an undefeated young American named Tom Hyer. Backers of the fight guaranteed the combatants $5,000 each, an unprecedented sum in the history of the American prize ring to that point. In this era when the Irish and Irish Americans were struggling to gain a foothold in American society and faced widespread prejudice, the ethnicities of the fighters, one born in Ireland and the other born in the United States. For the first time ever, Americans of all levels of society were all discussing "The Great $10,000 Fight."

Despite public interest, law enforcement pressure and the necessary secrecy meant that only roughly one hundred people watched Sullivan and Hyer do battle near Still Pond Creek in Maryland on February 7, 1849. Bigger and younger, Hyer emerged victorious after just seventeen minutes and eighteen seconds of bare-knuckle warfare, handing Sullivan the first defeat of his career.

Again, Sullivan stayed away from the ring for years before returning to face the up-and-coming John Morrissey in 1853. Like Sullivan, Morrissey had been born in Ireland, but he was raised from childhood in Troy, New York. After gaining a disqualification victory over Tom Hyer's friend George Thompson, Morrissey had failed to lure Tom Hyer or British Champion William Perry into a championship match. When Sullivan agreed to face him, some figured the winner would be the new American champion. The fight took place at Boston Corners, an obscure train stop just over the New York State border, out of reach of that state's law enforcement, secluded on the opposite side of the Taconic Mountains from Great Barrington, Massachusetts, the closest town with any substantial law enforcement. A crowd of roughly 3,000 gathered there on October 13 to what ended up being a bizarre and chaotic fight.

Sullivan, outweighed by 21 pounds, proved Morrissey's master in speed and skill. By the sixth round, "Morrissey presented a horrible appearance, the blood streaming from his nose and mouth in profusion," but he continued to press after his opponent. Morrissey occasionally landed telling blows, but the wily Sullivan would simply drop to his knees intentionally anytime he thought he was in trouble. Under the London Prize Ring rules that governed bare-knuckle boxing, this was not technically illegal, but Sullivan clearly took advantage of this to protect himself and frustrate his opponent.[3]

In the thirty-seventh round, Morrissey got ahold of Sullivan near the ropes. What followed was described differently by the first-hand accounts of reporters on the scene, but all agree that supporters of both men were soon in the ring in a "general riot." Both prizefighters left the ring thinking they had won by disqualification. The next day, the referee later told the *New York Herald* he considered Morrissey the victor, but the justice of that call was disputed for years by some of those who had seen the fight first-hand.

Looking back more than twenty years later, Morrissey called the match with Sullivan "the hardest fight I ever had. He was an artist, and he broke my nose, and cut me all to pieces; but I have always known that I could keep my legs and stand up until any of my opponents were worn out." Sullivan concurred in an earlier interview. "You might as well hit at a brick wall as hit that man on the head," he once remarked.[4]

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[3]*New York Herald*, October 13, 1853

[4]*Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 1, 1874; *New York Herald*, May 2, 1878

Police arrested Sullivan on November 3, 1853 for his participation in a prize fight, sending him to the prison in Lennox, Massachusetts. Tom Hyer, showing that his longstanding rivalry with Sullivan was truly quashed, paid the Irishman's bail of between $1,500 and $2,000, a sum he was only able to raise by collecting funds from Sullivan's well-wishers among New York's sporting men and politicians.

Likely looking to avoid further jail time or a fine following a trial, Sullivan skipped town and returned to California sometime in 1854. There he met a woman named Emily, who would later claim to be his wife, though both were already married to other people. In late 1855, the couple ventured out to Hawaii, where, if newspaper stories of the day are to be believed, he taught boxing to King Kamehameha IV. Apparently, the King caused great displeasure among his people by keeping Sullivan as his "constant companion" and treating Emily better than he did visiting representatives of the French and English crowns. At any rate, the couple was back in the San Francisco area by April 1856, Sullivan earning money in his tried-and-true methods, as a boxer (in paid exhibitions), gambler, shoulder hitter, and ballot box stuffer. He was, wrote Ed James, early chronicler of the American prize ring, "a power and a terror for miles around." Early in that year, or late in the previous, Emily gave birth to a daughter.[5]

It was in this period that Sullivan likely became acquainted with a strapping lad from Morrissey's hometown of Troy, New York named John Heenan. Heenan and Morrissey had been street thugs together as youngsters in Troy, but Heenan had come west in his late teens during 1849 as part of the Gold Rush. Six-foot, two inches tall and nearly 200 pounds, he had worked as a laborer for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company in Benicia, California before meeting up with manager Jake Cusick, who took him to San Francisco.

Impressed by Heenan's size and reputation, Sullivan took the youngster on as a sort of protégé and sparring partner. They gave several friendly boxing exhibitions together in San Francisco theaters, earning Heenan "high commendation as a pugilist." Eventually the sporting public of that city began to clamor for a real prize fight between the legend and the upstart, but Sullivan balked at the idea. Careful not to give the impression of cowardice, he insisted he avoided fighting because he wanted to remain friends with Heenan. However, Sullivan hinted at one day returning to New York with Cusick and Heenan to organize a fight between his promising discovery and John Morrissey.[6]

Meanwhile, Sullivan backed the wrong man when he stuffed ballots for one James P. Casey, an unscrupulous and violent local politico who had gotten his start in New York and had done time in Sing Prison. Because Sullivan somehow got to a position of judge of elections, his support helped get Casey elected as city supervisor, an office for which he had not even appeared on the ballot. Later, Sullivan openly bragged about using a trick box with a false bottom to secure Casey's election. Casey's violent tendencies would bring about the downfall of many men associated with him. When *The San Francisco Bulletin* began running articles about Casey's disreputable behavior and the questionable way by which he had come to his office, a public rivalry of slander and accusations erupted between Casey, editor of the *San Francisco Sunday Times*, and the *Bulletin*'s founder, James King, culminating in Casey's shooting King to death in broad daylight on Montgomery Street on May 14, 1856. This crime ushered in an era of violent vigilante justice in California.

Citizens of San Francisco formed a so-called Vigilance Committee in the wake of King's death. Heavily armed members laid siege to the county jail, forcibly removing Casey and overseeing his hanging from the second story of their own headquarters. Despite this perceived justice, the

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[5] James, *The Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan*, 22; *Wide West*, June 8, 1856; *Daily Alta California*, February 24, 1856;*Gloucester Journal*, March 22, 1856;*Sacramento Daily Union*, June 4, 1856

[6]*New York Herald*, October 22, 1859

Committee remained in force through the next several years, political corruptors being especially favorite targets. They counted among their numbers several high-placed members of society, all claiming to be acting righteously. They acted outside of the law, but their numbers and power were such that no official law enforcement could prevent their acts.

The committee had a particularly anti-Irish bent.They arrested Sullivan and an associate named Billy Mulligan at Casey's funeral on Monday, May 26, 1856. Interrogators forced Sullivan to sign a confession to political fixing and ballot stuffing under threat of violence. They held him in a former appraiser's office on Sacramento Street. The Vigilance Committee told him and the public that they did not intend to hang him as they had Casey, but instead they meant to force him out of the country. When Emily and other friends visited him, he told them of his fear of hanging. She reassured him that he would not be hanged, and then, according to her account, "he did not seem much depressed in spirits and was cheerful as usual." When she returned, he began talking of suicide, saying that as a Catholic he knew he could not go through with the act.[7]

Shortly thereafter, Sullivan's body was discovered in his makeshift cell, among what were known as the Committee Rooms on Sacramento Street, his left arm nearly cut in half at the elbow, and a knife nearby.

California newspapers reported that Sullivan had been restless in the early morning hours before his death. At about six o'clock, he had requested and received a glass of water from a guard. He supposedly told this guard that he had been awakened by a nightmare in which the guards had seized him and hanged him from his cell window. The guard tried to console him by saying that the committee had no intention to hang him, that they instead intended to have him deported. Sullivan refused to believe this but did calm down after drinking the water. The guard then left him, and Sullivan was alone for the next two hours before his body was discovered. The doctors called to the scene confirmed that he was dead and had likely been dead for "some time," noting the coldness of the body. He likely passed out from loss of blood and died painlessly, reported the papers.

Before the day was out, a coroner's jury returned its verdict that Sullivan had died from the knife wound in his arm, despite rumors already circulating that the wound had been created to cover up the fact that the vigilantes had poisoned him.

Newspapers at the time were very politically and ethnically biased, and their accounts of controversial events must always be taken as potentially skewed. One possibly unbiased account of Sullivan's death might be in the memoirs of Charley Duane, another controversial figure in San Francisco at the time. Though he had known Sullivan for many years, they were far from friends. Duane probably understates the case when he says, "I did not have much regard for him at any time." But Duane was a vocal opponent of the Vigilance Committee. He had already survived a violent run-in with them himself, so he could not be accused of blindly supporting their statements.[8]

Various tales of Sullivan's end were already spreading through the streets of San Francisco within hours of his death. Curious to get the truth for himself, Duane visited the city morgue and saw Sullivan's body on the day of his death. The place was packed with people. Duane made note of how deeply Sullivan's left arm had been severed at the elbow, and he ordered his own private autopsy to be done by two physicians.

Granted ample time to investigate, the doctors reported that Sullivan had not been poisoned, but that he had indeed died by the wound in his arm. But they doubted that the wound had been

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[7] *New York Times*, June 30, 1856; *Sacramento Daily Union*, June 3, 1856

[8] Duane, *Against the Vigilantes*, 127

inflicted by the pocketknife purported by the authorities to have been his method of death. His captors had claimed that Sullivan had been given the knife to help him cut his food. The doctors found that the knife was too dull to cut through human flesh. Even if it could, why would a man willingly endure the pain of sawing almost entirely through his own arm – unnecessarily past the artery that would ensure his death – with a small pocketknife?

Duane reported the autopsy's findings to his associates, convincing most that Sullivan had indeed been murdered, and that his arm had in fact been cut by a saber. Duane began hearing rumors that Sullivan's killer was a man named Jessel. Sullivan had beaten Jessel in street fight back in New York City and, by coincidence, Jessel was working as a guard in the Committee Rooms during Sullivan's illegal incarceration. Ed James also came across the Jessel story, and he believed it. In his account, two other guards held Sullivan down while Jessel cut open the prisoner's arm with a bowie knife. James claimed this story had been personally related to him by a man who had been a prisoner in an adjoining room.[9]

Though they had not been friends in life, Duane arranged and paid for Sullivan's funeral. Years later, after conversations with former members of the Vigilance Committee, even Duane would be convinced that Sullivan somehow killed himself out of fear that he would be hanged.

Yankee Sullivan, or James Sullivan, or James Ambrose, the first widely known boxing star in America, was buried in San Francisco's Mission Dolores Cemetery. For two years, his resting place remained unmarked until a fan from Liverpool, England paid for a headstone. Its inscription reports that he had "died by the hands of the V.C."It includes the epitaph, "Remember not, O Lord, our offenses, nor those of our parents. Neither take thou vengeance of our sins. Thou shalt bring forth my soul out of tribulation, and in thy mercy thou shalt destroy mine enemies."

Kenneth Bridgham is the author of "The Life and Crime of John Morrissey," published by Win by KO Publications and available through Amazon and other booksellers. He writes for thefightcity.com and his other boxing writings can be found athttps://medium.com/@kennethbridgham

[9]James, *The Life and Battles of Yankee Sullivan*, 22-24