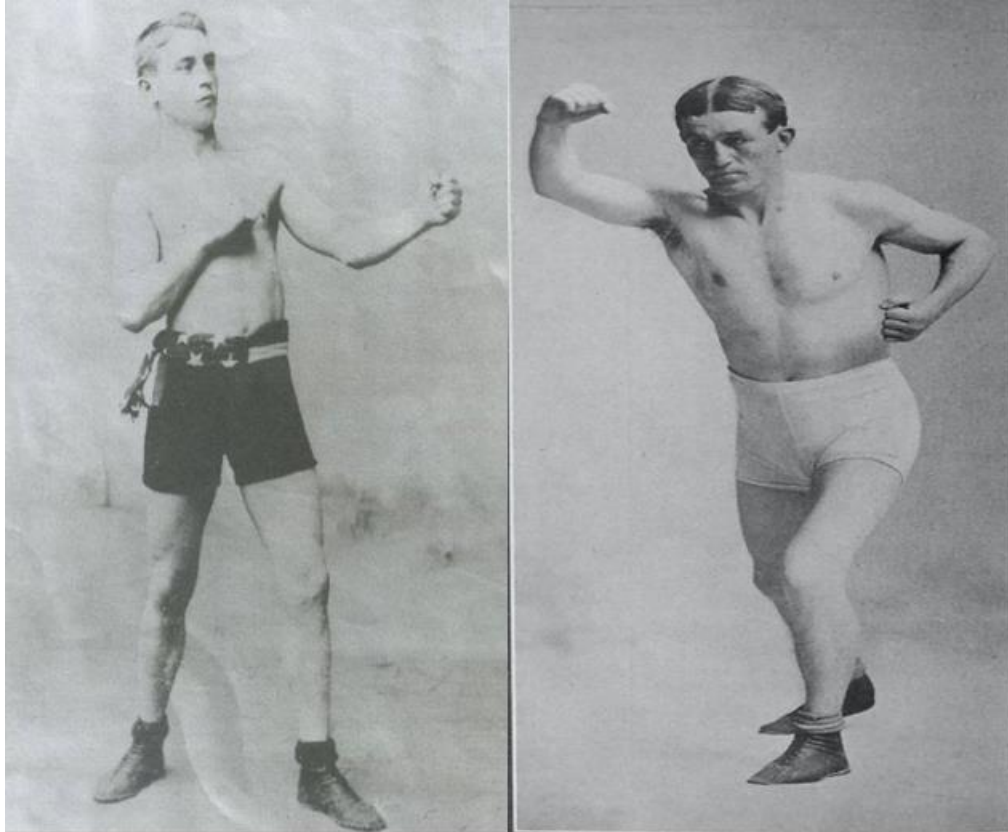


BARGE FIGHT: 1898

McClelland V Henninger

By: Vincent T. Ciaramella



R: Yock Henninger

L: Jack McClelland

"At times even a barge on one of the three rivers would be utilized as a venue and on many a night shouts and cheers could be heard on the shore from a passing boat as the fighters inside battled desperately for a \$50 prize." --From "Pittsburgh Boxing: A Pictorial History" by Douglas Cavanaugh

March 12, 1898

A flat-bottomed barge departs from the intersection of Ferry and Water Streets, making its way down the Monongahela where it merges with the Allegheny to form the Ohio River. Aboard are two of Pittsburgh's top featherweights along with around 100 fans waiting to see these two mitters square off. At \$5 a ticket (\$185.79 in 2024), 80 tickets were sold bringing the gate to \$400 (\$14,863.47 in 2024), with each combatant receiving an even split of \$200 collected from the fans (\$7,431.73 in 2024) along with \$175 (\$6,502.77 in 2024) apiece out of the proceeds of the ticket sales, though McClelland would later state that it was \$133 (\$4,942.10 in 2024). About 20 other men sneak aboard, despite the best efforts of County Detective Bob Robinson and the promoters. All are about to witness the longest fight to-date in Pittsburgh history, though they didn't know it.

The barge drops anchor in a dark, secluded spot along the back channel adjacent to Neville Island near the streetcar bridge that connects Montour Junction with upper Coraopolis. Jack McClelland, the *Pride of Pittsburg*, is about to face John Henigin, known to fight fans as Yock Henninger. Accompanying the combatants are a who's who of the Pittsburgh boxing scene as well as others from far away. In Henninger's corner are Buck Cornelius, Loudon Campbell, Joe Bernstein, Jerry Friel, and Harry Steele. McClelland's side boasts his brother, William along with Otto Black, Jack Bennette, and Jesse Pavey. Both camps await the opening bell.

It's now 11 o'clock, both pugilists are in the ring, the bout should be underway, but McClelland refuses to fight. He won't duke it out unless Henninger agrees that hitting with one arm free while in a clinch is barred. Henninger rejects McClelland's demand. Both sides hold firm. Finally, McClelland agrees to a coin toss to settle the dispute. A coin is flipped, and it lands in McClelland's favor. It's now 11:25 and the fight is about to get underway. With 4oz gloves, both pugilists come out of their corners ready to send the other down or possibly over the side.

Round 1: The fight begins with both boxers feeling each other out for a few seconds before Henninger rushes McClelland, hitting his body with both fists, while ducking a right swing. This would be the pace of the fight. Henninger leading with McClelland reacting, thus causing the former to do twice the amount of work.

Round 4: Henninger draws first blood. He lands a punch straight to McClelland's nose which begins to drip like a faucet. McClelland slips down to avoid further punishment, which elicits boos and jeers from the crowd. McClelland gets back up and fights hard and true for the remainder of the bout.

Round 5: It's all Yock.

Round 7: McClelland goes down for an eight count.

Round 8: McClelland's sides are glowing red from the onslaught of Henninger's fists. The fight isn't going his way. Henninger then plants a fist right in McClelland's jaw before the bells ends the round.

Round 11: It's now McClelland's turn to draw blood, though Henninger's side claims he used his elbow to set their man's nose leaking.

Round 15: Henninger chases McClelland around the ring, hitting him with several lefts. The fans erupt, cheering for Henninger.

Round 18: It's all McClelland from bell to bell.

Round 29: Henninger sends McClelland down with a blow to the head. McClelland goes down but gets up at six.

Round 30: McClelland turns the tables. He lands three shots to Henninger's head which causes him to see stars.

Round 35: Both fighters are gassed. The ref announces:

"Everybody's had enough for the money. You've all seen what you came to see. I know declare the bout a draw and I also wish to announce that these same boys will fight again in the near future, just as soon as you fellows make up a bigger purse and one that will be worth their while to fight for."

He drops the white handkerchief, and the crowd begins to cheer "draw, draw." The fight, which lasts 2 hours and 20 minutes, sets a record in Pittsburgh Boxing History that has yet to be matched or exceeded and most likely never will.

Years later, McClelland reminisces about the fight in an article published in the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*:

"Henninger gave me my hardest fight. He really had the better of it. I was a shuffler and the cracks in the flooring bothered me while Yock picked up his feet and moved nimbly about. I later knocked him out in six rounds in Carnegie but in that first fight Yock really made it tough for me."

Later in the interview, he states that:

"I had him going for a while and his friends wanted him to quit in the 22nd round, but he rallied and carried on until the bout was stopped and declared even. We fought with four-ounce gloves and received \$133 apiece."

McClelland and Henninger would have a rematch in Carnegie, Pennsylvania in October of the same year. This time McClelland sent Henninger down in six rounds. It should be noted that Henninger was very ill before the bout and would be out for the next ten months. In fact, McClelland's future manager, Red Mason would hold a benefit show for Henninger to help the fallen fighter.

Throughout the late 19th century and into the early 20th century, the legality of the fight game was in a state of flux in the *Smoky City*. Depending on who was in charge at any given time, dictated the lawfulness of the sport. This made it necessary for professionals to seek out of the way and hidden places such as barns, barges, and basements to practice their craft, hence this fight taking place on a barge out on the Ohio River. Even the March 11 edition of the *Pittsburg Post* kept the location a secret and instead it gave a vague description that it would "take place in private near

Pittsburg.” While this fight wasn’t unique in being staged on a barge, the McClelland/Henninger contest is still remembered 126 years later for its record setting time and rounds, a feat that will most likely never be equaled or surpassed.

*Vincent T. Ciaramella is a Pittsburgh baseball and boxing historian who specializes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A high school Psychology teacher and nine times published author, he is also the great-great grandson of Jack McClelland and author of the book: *Jack McClelland: The Pride of Pittsburg*

