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The Early Boxing Career of Jess Willard (1910-1911)

By Arly Allen

Elk City Oklahoma

July 4, 1910, Jess Willard drove his 4-mule team into Elk City, Oklahoma and learned that Jack Johnson had defeated the great Jim Jeffries to retain the heavyweight championship of the world. The country was alive with the news. In many parts of Oklahoma riots had followed the verdict. Feelings ran high. Harvey Payne, a postal employee and friend of Jess', met him on the street and urged Willard to consider defeating Johnson, now that Jeffries had failed. " Jess, you're big enough to lick this nigger. Why don't you do it?" Payne is supposed to have said. ("Celebration Visitors Will See Willard in Pageant Every Night," **Elk City Daily News**, April 15, 1951, p. 1; Robert W. Edgren, "History of Heavyweight Championship Fights for the Past Thirty Years—Jess Willard beats Johnson," in **Souvenir [Program] of the Willard-Dempsey Boxing Exhibition held at Toledo, Ohio, July 4, 1919**, no page number)

Jess Willard was big enough. He stood 6 ft. 6 ¼ inches and weighed about 215 pounds. His strength was legendary. While driving a wagon near Ft. Cobb, he had regularly lifted 500 pound bales of cotton into his wagon. And when his wagon overturned north of Elk City, with a 640-pound bale in it, he had righted the wagon and reloaded the bale by himself. But he was not boxer. Because of his size, few men wanted to test him. He was more likely to be a referee than a participant in local fights. ("Willard Fought First Bout for Amount of \$25," **Joplin News Herald**, April 7, 1915, p.6; "Can Oklahoma 'Hopes' beat J. Johnson," **Daily Oklahoman**, Dec. 25, 1910, p. 8; W.D. Wolfe, "Emmett, Kansas, Backing Willard 'To the Limit,'" **Topeka Daily State Journal**, June 28, 1919, p. 5)

But Jess also needed money. The new railroads were putting the overland freight wagons out of business. Since he was married with a young daughter and another one on the way, Jess thought about the idea and agreed to try boxing. Harvey Payne arranged a couple of bouts in a local barn for Jess with the town tough. These were the first bouts in which Jess ever boxed with gloves. He was knocked out in his first bout in 3 rounds, but came back to knock out the fellow in six rounds. (Ruth M. Byers, "Jess Willard Tells Story of Start on Road to Championship," **Milwaukee Free Press**, April 18, 1915)

At the time, Elk City did not have a gymnasium or an athletic club where Jess could learn boxing. Thus, when the cotton harvest was over, Jess moved his family to Oklahoma City. On December 21, 1910, Willard walked into the Union Athletic Club. He announced that he wanted to learn how to box so that he could defeat Jack Johnson and become the heavyweight champion of the world.. ("Oklahoma City Has New Hope," **Daily Oklahoman**, Dec. 22, 1910, p. 12)

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

The Union Athletic Club was alive with activity at that time. The club had recently undergone a change in management. John David "J.D." Brock was now trying to build a following for boxing in Oklahoma City. He had just lost the greatest name in Oklahoma boxing history, Carl Morris, "the Original White Hope." Morris had started in Oklahoma City, but had moved his camp to Sapulpa and Tulsa. In an effort to replace Morris, Brock had gone to Kansas City where he hoped to find another heavyweight to become the headliner of his club. But he had no luck. Instead, in an attempt to build an audience, he had brought in Monte Attell, who claimed to be the bantamweight champion of the world, for a fight with Jeff O'Connell.

This strategy backfired on Brock. Monte Attell as a good boxer, but he had lost his title in February 1910. He was also brother of Abe Attell the featherweight champion, an even better fighter, but also a crook who later was banned from boxing for throwing a fight. Attell went on to a criminal career with Arnold Rothstein and had a part in fixing the World Series in the "Black Sox" scandal of 1919. Monte was cut from the same mold. His fight with O'Connell

was stopped in the 6th round when it was discovered that it was fixed. Brock was forced to apologize to the public and refund all of the money. ("Referee Stops Ten Round Bout," **Daily Oklahoman**, Dec. 14, 1910, p.8)

The loss of Morris and the Attell debacle left Brock searching for an answer. The sudden appearance of Willard set off a chain of events with historical consequences. The first reaction of the other boxers in the club was to laugh at the big man who wanted to learn how to box. But Brock talked to Willard and found that, although naïve, he was serious. A newspaper report on December 23 summed up Willard's future career:

*"After a conference lasting throughout the day Thursday [December 22, 1910], agreement was made between President J.D. Brock, president of the Union Athletic club and Jesse Willard, the "Oklahoma City hope" whereby Willard will train in Oklahoma City with the expectation of whipping Carl Morris and all the other heavyweight aspirants, and finally knocking the crown from Jack Johnson's head." (Memsic to Train New Heavyweight," **Daily Oklahoman**, Dec. 23, 1910, p.8)*

A new "White Hope" had been born.

February 8, 1911: Billy Evart and Frank Mayo, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Exhibition 9 Rounds

Jess Willard began training in the Union Athletic Club under the direction of Frank Mayo, a veteran heavyweight. Mayo had Willard practice behind a curtain, preventing club members from seeing him work. Due to a quarrel with the local County Attorney, Sam Hooker, Brock was forced to close the Union Athletic Club in January 1911. Brock then created a new club, the Benevolent Athletic Association, which provided the base for all of Willard's fights in Oklahoma City. In February, Mayo decided to stage an exhibition for the benefit of the members to show them Willard at work. On February 8, Willard boxed 4 vigorous rounds with his sparring partner, Billy Evart, and five more with Mayo. These were the first rounds Willard boxed before the members of the Benevolent Athletic Association (BAA)

February 15, 1911: Louis Fink, Sapulpa, Oklahoma. Lost on Foul, 10th Round

J.D. Brock tried to match Willard with Carl Morris in his first professional fight. The Morris camp, which was basking in the glory of Morris' defeat of former champion, Marvin Hart, considered Willard an irritant who was hornning in on Morris' fame. They decided to match Willard with Louis Fink, one of Morris' sparring partners. This was fortunate for Willard. Fink was an experienced fighter, having been heavyweight champion of Colorado, but he was 54 pounds lighter than Willard and 6 inches shorter. While he had more skill than Willard, he did not have the size to do Willard any damage. Willard, in turn, did not have the knowledge to do much damage to Fink.

The fight was a 15 round, main event in Morris' hometown of Sapulpa. It was agreed that there would be no hitting in clinches. Willard knocked Fink into ropes in first round and drew first blood in round two. Halfway through round 2, Willard quit and walked to his corner, thinking the bell had rung. Willard also stopped to look when anyone in the audience called his name. Fink jabbed and clinched and repeatedly staggered Willard with blows to head. Willard knocked Fink down in 3rd and nearly out in 6th round. In the 9th they wrestled and both fell to floor. Willard was short of breath from round 3 on. The referee, Al Venn of Tulsa, had to warn Willard several times about low blows and hitting in clinches. In the tenth round, Willard again hit Fink in a clinch and threw him to the ground. This foul cost Willard the fight. Venn raised Fink's hand and awarded him the bout.

A reporter covering the fight wrote: "Willard probably did not mean to foul, but he was so ignorant of all ring methods that he could not help it." After the fight, Willard went to one of those who had been calling his name out during the fight and extended his hand. "I guess I have met you," he said, "but I don't recall your name. You were calling to me during the fight, but I was too busy to [do] more than look at you. What do you want?" ("Hope Upended in Flying Ring Time," **Sapulpa Evening Light**, Feb. 16, 1911, p.1; "Willard Loses his First Bout," **Daily Oklahoman**, Feb. 16, 1911, p. 8; "Willard is Back in Harness Again," Feb. 19, 1911, p.8 [p.10 in electronic version])

March 7, 1911: Ed Burke, El Reno, Oklahoma. Won by Knockout in 3 Rounds.

J.D. Brock immediately challenged Fink for another fight and placed a bet of \$1,000 that Willard would knock him out inside of 3 rounds. The Morris camp took the bet and demanded an immediate rematch. Brock equivocated and said that the return match would have to be in May as he had Willard scheduled to fight a Charles Cavanaugh from

Dayton, Ohio for the next bout. But the bout with Cavanaugh never occurred. Instead, Willard was matched with Ed Burke from San Francisco who was a sparring partner of "Fireman" Jim Flynn. ("Willard Back in Harness Again," **Daily Oklahoman**, Feb. 19, 1911, p.8 [10]; "Sapulpan Will Support Fink," Feb. 21, 1911, p.8; "Willard Meets Cavanaugh Next," Feb. 17, 1911, p. 8; "Finke's Backers are in Hurry," Feb. 22, 1911, p. 8)

"Fireman" Jim Flynn was recovering from the recent death of his wife in Colorado. He had come to Oklahoma on the promise of Eddie Robinson for a bout with Carl Morris. Robinson had been the matchmaker for Morris, but he was fired before Flynn arrived. Morris' new manager, Frank B. Ufer, denied Flynn the match. Flynn then joined Brock's camp in Oklahoma City and began sparring with Willard. Flynn was known to be tough on his sparring partners. He later claimed that he had knocked Willard out during one of these sparring sessions, but there is no record of that in Oklahoma. Flynn also became the referee for Brock's fights at the Benevolent Athletic Association and probably served as the referee in the El Reno bout. ("Oklahoma City to get Big Bout," **Daily Oklahoman**, Jan. 5, 1911, p. 8; "Jim Flynn Here; Expected Bout," Feb. 15, 1911, p. 8; "Flynn Camps on Trail of Morris," Feb. 18, 1911, p. 8; "Jim Flynn may meet Willard; Once Beat Him," **The Pueblo [Colorado] Star-Journal**, April 5, 1915, p. 8)

Willard made quick work of Burke at El Reno and knocked him out in the third round. He could have knocked him out sooner, but he chose not to. According to a reporter at the scene: "At times Willard left his guard down and Burke landed on both the body and the head. Willard declared afterward that he wanted to see if it hurt, and that while each blow was a stinger, those to the head did not daze him and those to the body had no effect." "Willard Meets Burke Tonight," **Daily Oklahoman**, Mar. 7, 1911, p. 8; "Willard Defeats Burke in Third," Mar. 8, 1911, p.8)

March 13, 1911: "Big Six" Warner: Shawnee, Oklahoma. Willard a no show. 10 Round Bout

Willard was scheduled to meet "Big Six" Warner from Galveston, Texas in a 10 round bout at Shawnee, Oklahoma on March 13, 1911. Warner weighed about 175 pounds to Willard's 230. Willard and J.D. Brock went to Shawnee and were at the Majestic Theater for the preliminary fights. Ten minutes before the Willard-Warner fight was to begin, Willard left through the back door. A call to his hotel revealed that he had apparently hopped a freight train back to Oklahoma City. ("Innovation for Friday's Card," **Daily Oklahoman**, Mar. 9, 1911, p. 8; "Willard will be a Busy Man," Mar. 12, 1911, p.9; "Warm Boxing Bout at the Majestic," **Shawnee Daily Herald**, Mar. 13, 1911, p.6)

It is difficult at this remove to understand Willard's action. "Before he [Willard] left he is said to have remarked that he had been given to understand it was to be a knockout fight, and as it wasn't to be such, he didn't care to stay as he was no boxer." The Shawnee fans considered Willard to be a "yellow hope." "The action of Willard brands him as a quitter and in the future he will probably never receive any recognition from promoters of boxing exhibitions." Tommy Elks, a fight promoter, stepped in at the last moment and boxed Warner to a draw in six rounds. ("Willard Ducked the Big Texan," **Shawnee Daily News**, Mar. 14, 1911, p. 6; "Jess Willard's Feet Got Cold Last Night," **Shawnee Daily Herald**, Mar. 14, 1911, p. 3)

March 24, 1911: Louis Fink, Oklahoma City. Won by Knockout in 3rd Round.

Willard's next bout was his return engagement with Louis Fink. Fink, who would later become a member of Gene Tunney's camp when Tunney fought Jack Dempsey had just returned from a losing effort against Joe Cox, the Missouri "Hope" in Monett, Missouri. J.D. Brock had bet \$1,000 that Willard could knock Fink out in less than 3 rounds. To cover the bet, Brock held the fight in Oklahoma City in the gymnasium of the Benevolent Athletic Association. In doing this, Brock was taking a risk. The county attorney, Sam Hooker, had vowed to close down boxing in the county. To protect against this, Brock insisted that the fight was not a public event, but was restricted solely to members of the Athletic Association. However, Brock sold memberships like tickets through the P & R Cigar Stand outside the gym. This made the fight a quasi-public event. ("Heavyweights are Headliners," **Daily Oklahoman**, Mar. 19, 1911, p.9; "Heavyweights Clash Tonight," Mar. 24, 1911, p.8)

"Outclassing his opponent at every stage of the bout, Jess Willard, the Oklahoma City heavyweight won after 1 minute and 33 seconds of the third round had been ticked off over Louis Fink of Sapulpa last night." Fink followed the same pattern of the first fight: hit and clinch. In this fight, however, hitting in the clinches was allowed. Willard took away Fink's advantage by kidney punching in the clinches. Fink was counted out in the third round and Brock won his bet. ("Willard Wins in Third Round," **Daily Oklahoman**, Mar. 25, 1911, p. 8)

April 11, 1911: Patsy Corrigan, Frank Mayo, and E.A. Cruse, El Reno, Oklahoma. Exhibition.

Sam Hooker immediately issued warrants for the arrest of Willard and Fink after the bout. Fink fled the county and Willard was forced to surrender to County Judge Hayson. His bond was fixed at \$500 and he was scheduled for trial later. Willard immediately returned to training for his next fight. ("Willard Makes Full Surrender," **Daily Oklahoman**, Mar. 28, 1911, p. 8)

Once again Brock tried to match Willard with Morris and again this did not happen. Willard instead was matched with Battling Britt of Henryetta, Oklahoma. Britt had lost to both Carl Morris and his brother, Ulric. The Willard-Britt bout was to take place in El Reno, Oklahoma on April 11, 1911. Before the bout, Willard said he wished he were not fighting Britt, as he did not feel he would have any difficulty defeating him. Britt apparently felt the same way and failed to show up. He said that he felt Willard was much better than Morris. Willard therefore boxed an exhibition with Patsy Corrigan who was to become his new trainer, Frank Mayo, his original trainer, and E. A. Cruse, who may have been a restaurant owner. ("Willard Really Desires Morris," **Daily Oklahoman**, Mar. 31, 1911, p. 8; "Willard Leaves to Oppose Britt," April 10, 1911, p. 3; Mandino Arrives Today for Bout," April 13, 1911, p. 8)

April 14, 1911: Al Mandino [Al Williams?], Oklahoma City. Won by a Knockout in 4th Round.

Al Mandino was a heavyweight from Knoxville, Tennessee. He weighed about 200 pounds and was considered a tough fighter. He had fought a bout with Jim Flynn in Muskogee, Oklahoma and lost in 4 rounds. He then came to Oklahoma City to meet Willard. At the beginning of the 4th round, Mandino was knocked down three times in rapid succession. The third time Willard knocked him down, he knocked him out. "The last blow was a terrific one. It broke two of Mandino's teeth, tore open his jaw on the inside, also his lips, and he went down like a log." Mandino later said that that was the hardest blow he had ever received. Willard put Mandino out in half a minute less than it took Flynn to dispose of him. Jim Flynn was the referee. The fight was held in the **BAA** gymnasium in the Center Court clubhouse. The next day, Sam Hooker again issued warrants for arrest of the fighters and Mandino left town. ("Willard Meets Mandino Tonight," **Daily Oklahoman**, April 14, 1911, p. 8; "Willard Knocks Out Al Mandino," April 15, 1911, p.8; "Warrants Out for Prize Fighters," April 16, 1911, p.8)

There were later reports that Al Mandino changed his name to Al Williams. Under that name he had bouts with Carl Morris and again met Willard on July 4, 1913 in Reno, Nevada. ("Jess Willard is found by Cutler," **Daily Oklahoman**, Feb. 12, 1912, p.3; Edw. W. Cochrane's Column, "Willard Admits He Quit in Fight With Cox, but Says He Was Forced to – Comment," **Kansas City Journal**, Feb.15, 1913, p.8)

May 15, 1911: Bill Schiller, Arena between El Reno and Oklahoma City. Won by Technical Knockout in 4th Round

J.D. Brock was now struggling to hold his fight program together. Two warrants had been issued against Willard for bouts in Oklahoma County. To avoid more trouble, Brock closed down the **BAA** for the summer and joined with El Reno to build a new outdoor arena midway between El Reno and Oklahoma City on the interurban line. He hoped to be able to hold fights there without interference by the sheriffs of Oklahoma and Canadian counties. He signed an old fighter, Bill Schiller, from Louisville, Kentucky. Schiller had come, as many others, to Oklahoma to try to get a fight with Carl Morris. When this was not forthcoming, he signed for a fight with Willard. Schiller was aware of the situation in Oklahoma City. He had worked out with Willard at the **BAA** before the fight. He knew about the pressure being exerted by Sam Hooker. There seems no doubt that Schiller's fight with Willard was fixed.

"Willard was given the decision in the early part of the fourth round. The session had no more than started when Willard rushed Schiller, who sank to one knee, seemingly exhausted. Willard stood over him, and his manager, Patsy Corrigan, the referee, rushed Schiller to his corner and held up Willard's arm." The crowd booed the decision and Schiller then told the crowd that he was not exhausted and was ready to go on. Willard agreed. "While I think Schiller undoubtedly would have been able to return to the contest, I know I had him beaten and could have beaten him in one or two rounds had we been fighting, but our instructions were to box and that is what we did." Willard went on: "I didn't extend myself. I didn't dare. Had I been allowed to turn loose, it would have been a different story and I would have showed up to better advantage."

While this situation would have been illegal in modern boxing, the intent at this time was to make the bout legal. By going 4 rounds, Brock justified the charge of admission. By sparring rather than fighting, the fighters were trying to put on a "boxing exhibition" rather than a "prizefight." The fact that the arena was on the boundary between two

counties was also an attempt to elude the police. The crowd, however, was upset because they expected to see somebody arrested, and nobody was. ("Schiller Comes to Make Match," **Daily Oklahoman**, April 25, 1911, p.8; "Open Air Arena to be Erected," April 30, 1911, p.9; "Big Men Clash Here this Week," May 7, 1911, p.9; "Willard 'Wins' in Fourth Round," May 16, 1911, p. 8)

Elk City, Oklahoma Again

July 4, 1911: Frank Lyons, Elk City, Oklahoma. Won by a Decision in 10 rounds.

Before the Schiller fight took place, Brock finally got Carl Morris to agree to meet Jess Willard. This fight was scheduled for Tulsa on June 10, and promised to be the greatest fight in Oklahoma history. But before it could take place, Jess Willard was arrested by Sam Hooker and sent to trial for "prizefighting." At the same time, J.D. Brock was forced out of the fight game. He resigned as president of the Benevolent Athletic Association. He sold Willard's contract to a couple of real estate men, A.W. Phillips and A.H. Cutrell, and was forced to serve as a witness for the prosecution in Willard's trial. ("Morris Finally Accepts Willard," **Daily Oklahoman**, May 10, 1911, p. 10; "Brock Leaving the Boxing Game," May 29, 1911, p.3; "Willard Traded for Real Estate," June 7, 1911, p. 8)

Willard was found guilty of the crime of "prizefighting," based upon the bout with Louis Fink on March 24. He was spared a jail sentence and but was fined \$100 and court costs. Brock had rid himself of Willard by this time, and the new managers would not pay Willard's fine. Willard then fled Oklahoma County and went back to Elk City. ("Jury Knocks Out Boxing Contests," **Daily Oklahoman**, June 1, 1911, p.8; "Willard gets off easy," June 18, 1911, p.2)

Willard appears to have spent the latter part of June, July and part of August in Elk City. While there he had a 10 round bout with Frank Lyons of Jacksonville, Florida. Lyons was 26 years old and weighed 230 and had a reach that was only ¼ inch shorter than Willard. He was thus nearly as tall as Willard. His trainer, Charles Leonhardt, accompanied him. The bout was slow and cautious on both sides. The crowd grew restless and there were frequent shouts of "Fight!" Willard won the majority of the rounds, with only the 6th going to Lyons. It was Willard's victory by a popular decision. ("Willard is given Popular Decision," **Daily Oklahoman**, July 5, 1911, p.9)

There was a later rumor that Frank Lyons was a pseudonym for Luther McCarty, and that this represented the first meeting of Willard and McCarty. However, McCarty was supposed to be fighting in Fargo, North Dakota on this day. Further, Lyons appears to have been older, heavier and taller than McCarty was. Thus this rumor seems unfounded. ("Here's What is Claimed to be the True Story of Willard's First Victory over M'Carthy," **Daily Oklahoman**, Feb. 17, 1915, p.10)

August 10, 1911: Mike McKimminsky, Hammon, Oklahoma. Won by a decision in 10 rounds.

We have no real knowledge of what Willard did between July 4 and August 10. He was scheduled to have a bout with W. O. Stuckey at Cheyenne, Oklahoma on July 5, but I can find no record of this in the Cheyenne or any other paper. At a later date, a banker, Harold Wallace, claimed to have had a bout with Willard around this time in Ardmore, Oklahoma, but I have not been able to confirm this. On August 6, 1911, **The Daily Oklahoman** announced that the Knickerbocker Athletic Club of New York City was sending O.H. Stacy to Oklahoma City to look at Willard and perhaps offer him a contract. It seems unlikely that Willard was in Oklahoma City at the time. Nonetheless, he or his new manager, A.W. Phillips, may have had some contact with Stacy, for the next month, when Willard was in Springfield, Missouri, he told the newspapers he planned to go on to New York City where he had been promised some engagements. ("Willard is given Popular Decision," **Daily Oklahoman**, July 5, 1911, p. 9; "Banker Might have become Pugilist," April 20, 1919, p. 26; "Promoter now after Willard," August 6, 1911, p. 9; "Scrape About Scrappers," **Springfield Missouri Republican**, Sept. 22, 1911, p.4; "Oklahoma Boxer in Springfield," **Springfield Daily Leader**, September 23, 1911, p. 2)

On August 10, Willard boxed with Mike McKimminsky, "the Irishman with the Russian name." The fight took place in Hammon, Oklahoma, 18 miles north of Elk City. Willard was well known there as he had hauled freight between Hammon and Elk City before the railroad came in January 1911. It is likely that Willard was considered the local favorite.

The newspaper report of this fight is confusing. The fight was advertised for Thursday night, August 10. The paper reporting the fight carried a date of Thursday, August 10. Either the paper was published the day after the printed

publication date, or the description of the fight was written before the fight actually occurred. The full description of the fight is as follows. The punctuation and spelling are exactly as in the printed paper.

in the evening after a few preliminary the State scrap leature the white mans hope, and the Irishman with the Russian name was pulled off—in about ten round Jess got tired trying to keep up with the other fellow and cease to rinn him around the ring. The gaiety of the dance kept up till a late hour. It was estimated that there were 2500 people present all having a good time, a special train from Elk City was run arriving in time to see the fight bringing quite a crowd of people.

From this I conclude that Jess Willard won a popular decision over Mike McKimminsky in ten rounds. (Advertisement for a “Sparring Exhibition between Jess Willard and Mike McKimminsky, Thursday Night August 10,” **The Hammon News**, Aug. 3, 1911, p.4; “A Great Success,” Aug. 10, 1911, p.1).

Springfield, Missouri

September 26, 1911: Paul Romano [Victor McLaglen]. Springfield, Mo. Exhibition 4 rounds

Following the bout in Hammon, Oklahoma, Jess Willard once again disappeared. It seems likely that he sent his wife and children back to Kansas to stay with her mother and father. Jess himself seems to have gone to Colorado. There was a story current after he defeated Jack Johnson, that Jess had worked picking beans near Pueblo. The story suggests that Willard left Oklahoma and went to Boone, Colorado where he worked on the E.H. Smith farm for a dollar a day and board. While there, Willard discussed having fought members of the Carl Morris camp and taught the other farmhands something of boxing. He stayed about a month, through the harvest, and then went back to Oklahoma. (“Big Jess Willard worked as Farm Hand near Pueblo,” **The Pueblo [Colorado] Chieftain**, April 6, 1915, p.3)

Upon his return, he teamed up with A.W. Phillips, one of the two real estate men who had purchased his contract. At the end of September they went to Joplin and then to Springfield, Missouri, looking for a fight with Joe Cox, the Missouri hope. Joe Cox was training in Galena, Missouri and Willard was in the clubrooms of the Springfield Athletic Club when a Paul Romano came to challenge Joe Cox. Romano claimed that he was a heavyweight with 35 bouts and no defeats. He claimed that he had fought a 6 round exhibition with Jack Johnson and was on his way to fight Carl Morris. He further said that he was the son of an archbishop who was traveling under an assumed name so that his parents would not know that he was on the stage. Billy McCarney was also in the clubroom and after listening to this braggadocio suggested that since Willard also wanted to fight Cox, that Romano and Willard fight for the right to box Cox. Within a short time the battle was joined. “The two men, both heavyweights, put on what was considered as good as any regular exhibition seen here since the organization of the Springfield Athletic club, and sparred in just as good form as if they had been fighting for the world’s championship.” After 4 rounds, Romano left with a black eye and the decision that Willard could fight Cox, while he would go to Oklahoma to fight Morris.

Despite the apparent exaggerations, everything that Romano said was true. He was a boxer and had fought a 6 round exhibition with Jack Johnson in Vancouver, Canada. He had also fought a one round bout with Robert Fitzsimmons. He was the son of an Anglican archbishop from South Africa, and was traveling with his brother in vaudeville under an assumed name. Later he did fight with Carl Morris, albeit as a sparring partner, when Morris was preparing for his bout with Luther McCarty. His real name was Victor McLaglen. He became an actor, winning an Academy Award for Best Actor in 1935. He acted in many films with John Wayne, most notably **The Quiet Man** (1952). (“Local Heavyweight is Training on the James,” **Springfield Daily Leader**, Sept. 22, 1911, p.1; “Heavyweights to Appear Thursday,” Sept. 25, 1911, p. 2; “Fast Tryout at Athletic Room,” Sept. 26, 1911, p.2)

October 4, 1911: “Tim O’Neill”[Unknown]: Springfield, Mo. Exhibition 1 round

Willard and a number of others were sitting in the clubroom of the Springfield Athletic Club, when two unknowns walked in. The smaller of the two announced that the bigger was “Tim O’Neill of Chicago” and that he wanted to box Joe Cox or any other big fellow. Cox was still in Galena. Billy McCarney, who was also there, knew the real Tim O’Neill and recognized that this was an imposter. He suggested that perhaps “O’Neill” would be willing to take on Willard instead of Cox. After some hesitation, “O’Neill” agreed.

He was soon togged out in gymnasium clothes, the lights turned on and before any one could say ‘Cock Robin’ they were at it hammer and tongs. It was a regular scrap. Blows came thick and fast for the first

minute and a half, but a solid left followed by a right to the jaw put 'O'Neill' at the mercy of Willard, who stepped back refusing to hit him again.

“O'Neill” and his manager were soon out the door and on their way to Oklahoma. (“Cox to Galena to Resume his Training Work,” **Springfield Missouri Republican**, Oct. 3, 1911, p.4; “Willard Has Informal Bout with Unknown,” Oct. 5, 1911, p.2)

October 9, 1911: Joe Cox: Springfield, Mo. Lost. Technical knockout in 5 rounds

The battle with Joe Cox was one of the strangest affairs of Willard's career.

Between the bout with “Paul Romano” and that with “Tim O'Neill,” Willard had been arrested and thrown in jail. When Willard and his manager, A.W. Phillips, had arrived in Joplin, they learned that Cox was no longer the darling of the area. For a variety of reasons, Cox had fallen out of favor with the local fans and they were actually hoping that someone would show up who could beat Cox. Thinking to make some easy money, Phillips tried to convince Jess to throw the fight with Cox. Willard refused. Phillips then abandoned Willard and refused to pay his bills. Willard was destitute and had to borrow money from Jimmy “Bowtie” Bronson for food. Bronson was the manager of the Southwest Athletic Club in Joplin, at the time. He was also managing a light heavyweight, Jeff Clarke, and had no room for Willard. (“Title Willard's only Reward in Havana Battle; Jess Says Phillips Destroyed Contract,” **Daily Oklahoman**, Nov. 18, 1915, p.12; Daniel M. Daniel, “McCarney Mourned for Wit, Friendship,” Ring Magazine, Dec. 1948, pp. 26-27, 41)

Bronson then sent Willard on to Springfield to “Professor” Billy McCarney, who was the matchmaker for the Springfield Athletic Club. Willard met with McCarney and asked him to be his manager. When Phillips heard of this, he followed Jess to the Springfield Athletic clubrooms and, waving a gun, asked for McCarney, threatening to shoot the man who was interfering with his fighter. McCarney, who was alone at the time, persuaded Phillips, whom he had never met, that the “Professor” was out of town. Phillips left and McCarney called the police and told them that Phillips had threatened him with a gun. The police took the gun and sent Phillips out of town. (James Willard Mace, **The Life and Times of Jess Willard**, unpublished typescript in possession of the author, p.28)

Before he left, Phillips told the police that Willard was wanted in Oklahoma on a warrant for “prizefighting.” The police then arrested Willard and threw him in jail. Within a day Under-Sheriff Shelton, a friend of Willard's, arrived from Oklahoma City with the warrant. Since the crime was not a felony, Shelton could not force Willard to return. The Springfield police had already released Jess from the jail, apparently with some friendly advice to take it easy on Cox. Willard could have removed the warrant by paying the fine and costs, but again, he did not have any money. (“Oklahoma Heavyweight Locked Up in Holdover,” **Springfield Daily Leader**, Sept. 29, 1911, p.1; “White Hope Released When Police are Silent,” **Springfield Missouri Republican**, Sept. 30, 1911, p.3; “Oklahoma Officer Here with Papers for Boxer,” **Springfield Daily Leader**, Sept. 30, 1911, p.8; “Pugilist Held to Pay Heavy Fine and Costs,” **Springfield Missouri Republican**, Oct. 1, 1911, p. 2; Edw. W. Cochrane's Column, “Willard Admits He Quit in Fight with Cox, but Says He Was Forced to –Comment,” **Kansas City Journal**, Feb. 15, 1913, p.8)

Cox and Willard were finally matched to fight on October 9, 1911. Thinking the bout would be a big draw, Jack O'Leary, president of the athletic club, raised the price of memberships from 50 cents to \$5.00. This significantly reduced the size of the crowd. The papers also praised Willard to the detriment of Cox: “If he [Willard] shows half the class against Joe Cox that he did against Romano and “O'Neill,” then it is goodbye and a slow curtain for the local lad.” Given Willard's significant size advantage over Cox, who was only 6' 2” and about 190 pounds, compared to Willard's 6' 6 ¼” height and 230 weight, even Cox supporters felt he did not have a chance. (“Cox Matched with Willard for Next Bout,” **Springfield Missouri Republican**, Oct. 1, 1911, p.6; “Willard Has Informal Bout with Unknown,” Oct. 5, 1911, p.2; “Few Willing to Serve as Punching Bag,” Oct. 6, 1911, p.5)

The final stroke was when Governor Hadley arrived in Springfield on October 8 and met with the local prosecutor to discuss stopping the fight and closing the Springfield club. The prosecutor persuaded him not to stop the fight by assuring the governor that he would have in the audience sufficient policemen to take action if any illegal activities took place. (“Hadley Asks for Report on Boxing Mills,” **Springfield Missouri Republican**, Oct. 10, 1911, p. 1)

All of these events affected Willard. He had just been released from jail on the prizefighting charges and now he found his audience consisted mainly of policemen with instructions to arrest him again if anything went out of line. Both his former manager, and perhaps the police themselves, had suggested to him that he should lie down and lose

the fight to Cox. And so he did. (“Jess Willard Confesses Fake,” **Los Angeles Times**, Feb 17, 1913, pt. III, p.1; “Jess Willard is in Town,” Mar. 29, 1913, pt. III, p. 3).

*Renewing the attack in the fifth, with more “pep,” than any previous session, and bouncing them off every portion of Willard’s gigantic frame which he could reach without the aid of a step-ladder, Cox had the big man crying for mercy. With a sickly smile upon his face that much resembled an infant’s grin after taking a half an ounce of paregoric, Willard turned to [Jimmy] Bronson [the referee] and throwing up both hands yelled: “I’m in no condition to fight!” (“Willard Quits End of Fifth with Joe Cox,” **Springfield Missouri Republican**, Oct. 10, 1911, p. 3)*

Billy McCarney, who had become Willard’s new manager for this fight, jumped into the ring and shouted: “What are you quitting for? You’re not hurt, you big oaf!” “I know that, Mr. McCarney,” said Jess, “But it’s a wise man who quits before he is hurt.” (John D. McCallum, **The World Heavyweight Boxing Championship: A History**. (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1974), pp. 81-83)

Joe Cox was awarded the decision and Jess Willard became known in Springfield as the “Yellow Hope.”

Conclusion

Jess Willard began his career in boxing after the defeat of Jim Jeffries by Jack Johnson at Reno, Nevada on July 4, 1910. In this, he was no different than many other men who sought to become “The Great White Hope.”

That Willard actually defeated Johnson and became “The Great White Hope,” was due both to his own skills and to luck. His career during 1910 and 1911 showed both promise and problems. He demonstrated a considerable physical durability. He was never knocked down, or out. Yet he also demonstrated naiveté. He was physically tough, but showed no sign of the killer instinct that made Jack Dempsey, for example, such a success.

One thing that became evident in these first few years was the way in which the law affected Willard’s career. Throughout his entire life, Jess Willard was often involved in legal tangles.

His presence in Oklahoma led to legal challenges to boxing in that state. His bout with Joe Cox was more of a struggle with the law than it was with Cox. This was to continue throughout his career. The story of Jess Willard is inseparable from the story of the legality of boxing in the United States.

Arly Allen is a new member of IBRO and is currently working on a biography of Jess Willard and this paper is an offshoot of that work.
