

The Strange Death of 'Barbados Joe Walcott'

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(A special-thanks to Manuel Velazquez)

Joe Walcott, "The Barbados Demon" was truly a unique fighter. Born April 7th, 1872, in Barbados, West Indies, Joe fought in all four top divisions with unbelievable success, in a career that spanned from 1890 to 1911. He knocked out Joe Choynski, who was just a shade below Jim Corbett as a boxer. He fought Sandy Ferguson, 6 feet 5, and Fred Russell who stood 6 feet 3. He won the welterweight championship with a 5 round knockout over Rube Ferns in 1901. All of this may not sound so out-standing until you can consider that Joe Walcott had the shoulders of a linebacker, with 16 inch upper arms (as big as Jim Jeffries) that dangled to his knees, and stood only 5 feet 1½ inches. His weight was in the vicinity of 145.

Joe's finish as a champion was accidental. In 1905 Walcott went to a Negro dance in Boston, his home town. Joe was decked out in full attire. He wore among other things, a revolver in his hip pocket, and a straight razor in his vest. Joe danced, and drank half the night, and had a great time. All the time making frequent trips to the refreshment room. There, for some reason, Joe pulled out his revolver to show a friend how it worked. Joe knew less about guns than prize fighting. Holding the gun in his left hand, he clapped his right over the muzzle and fooled with the hammer. The gun went off. The bullet went through Joe's palm, splintered the first two knuckles of Joe's useful right, went on and killed the curious friend who wanted to see how it worked. It was a tragic accident, and Joe was acquitted, but he was through as world's welterweight champion. You could say this literally ended his career. Honey Melody a youngster out of Charleston, beat him twice after that.

Walcott's right hand was no good for fighting and he was through. He had a few unofficial fights with Sam Langford. It is said that Joe and Sam never met on the street or anywhere without immediately squaring off and going at it.

After years of ring-wars, and the wear and tear of heavy drinking and high living, Joe Walcott hung the gloves up after losing to a couple of nobodys in 1911.

Living in Philadelphia for a time, he moved to Malden Massachusetts, where he owned a beautiful home in a nice area. But things weren't going too well for the old battler. The drinking and riotous living had taken all his savings, and he finally hit the road. With his money all gone Joe took what menial jobs were available, and cribbed money off friends.

This is a period that few know about, and Walcott's known activities are sparse. In 1924 he assaulted a man, and was sentenced to serve 3 years in Boston. There was a time he worked on a steamer as a fireman. In August 1932, he lapsed into a coma in his home in Harlem, and was taken to Bellevue Hospital. The long years of battle had taken a bad toll.

In 1935, New York City's mayor, Jimmy Walker, heard that old Joe Walcott was down and out on the Bowery. Being a boxing fan from way back, Walker sent a couple of policemen to pick up the old prize fighter, and have him brought to his office. The cops, spotting the unusual figure on a street corner, approached him saying they wanted to talk to him. The knarled little black man put up hands ready to do battle. With much patience the police told Joe that Mayor Walker wanted to talk with him. Since Walcott liked Mayor Walker there wasn't any problem.

Walker made a phone call to the President of Madison Square Garden to see if the old "Barbados Demon" could be put on the payroll. After much haggling, Mayor Walker reminded the Garden President that he, as mayor, carried a lot of weight, and could make things mighty rough for Madison Square Garden. Joe was hired as "Head Porter" for \$35.00 a week, and slept in the Ranger Hockey team's



dressing room. He didn't have to do anything except pose for an occasional photographer with a broom in his hand, or on his knees giving the appearance of scrubbing the floor. All this lasted about a month, then for no apparent reason, Walcott disappeared, without a trace.

It was reported he went to Philadelphia where his sister lived, but before he could be found, was gone again. Another report came in that he might be in Cincinnati, Ohio, but again nothing came of it. It was as if the earth had quite literally swallowed Joe Walcott without a trace. The years went by and nothing was ever learned of the fate of the "Barbados Demon."

Around 1955 a boxing collector and historian came across evidence that Joe had died somewhere around the small community of Massillon, Ohio. It was learned that there had been a short, odd looking Negro that filled Joe's description that had worked briefly around Dalton, Ohio, a small town on the outskirts of Massillon.

From all the evidence available it finally became clear what had become of the old pug.

It seems that in the fall of 1935 two ambitious young men convinced Joe to go to Los Angeles to see if a movie could be made based on his life. En route they stopped at Massillon, Ohio to spend the night. Being black, Joe Walcott was refused a room. The two boys gave Joe fifty cents to buy some razor blades and told him to bed down in the car. When morning came they couldn't find him. From what was later gathered, Joe had drifted off to Dalton and just stayed there, Joe had always been a heavy drinker, but with age and health failing, he most likely wasn't in full command of himself. Upon further investigation his movements were traced to a bartender that probably was the last person to see Joe Walcott alive.

"I knew him very well. He acted like a pug, always bouncing around the place like he had taken too many on the head. He liked to tell about his old fights and the good times he used to have. I remember the last time I saw him, he said

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ne was saving up to go see his sister in Philadelphia. Poor old guy, I felt bad about how he died. He never bothered anybody."

It seems on either September 30th or the 4th of October, 1935, in the very early hours, a young musician was driving home from a "gig" in Massillon. It was about four in the morning, on U.S. 30, when out of the black of night the musician's headlights suddenly picked up a short dark figure walking East on the road. Before he could swerve, the Model "A" hit the shuffling form with a tremendous force. After the dazed driver got out of his wrecked auto, he could see the broken body was beyond help. Just as the sun was coming up, the undertaker from Dalton arrived, finding the body still lying in the middle of the highway, battered, and oozing gore. After removal, he tried to find someone to claim and identify the body, but no one came. It had been badly mangled with a broken arm, two broken legs, a fractured skull, all internal organs crushed, and almost every bone in his body broken.

The undertaker remembered the man years later. "There isn't any doubt that the man named Walcott is the man I

prepared for burial in 1935. I'd say he was about 5 feet tall, no neck, freakishly long arms, scarred around the eyes, mashed nose.

The funeral home kept the body the required 5 days. He was simply listed as "Joe Doe, Negro, October 4th, 1935," and was buried on the far side of Potter's field in an unmarked grave. After finally being located, the grave site was improvised with an old concrete slab with "Joe Walcott-Died Oct. 4, 1935" marked on it in black crayon. A collection was established, and a stone that simply had "JOE WALCOTT, BOXING CHAMPION" carved on it now marks his final resting place.

What was Joe doing out on that lonely stretch of road at that hour? It's a good guess that he was heading for a roadhouse that was nearby, for a drink.

It had taken 20 years, but after much speculation, the fate of Joe Walcott sadly came to light.

For a man that fought every top welter, middle, light heavy, and heavyweight of his time, Joe Walcott's death on a desolate Ohio highway, seems especially sad. In his pockets were found 2 packages of razor blades and 37 cents.

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