

BURYING THE "DEMON"

For a boxer who had crossed gloves with the likes of Sam Langford, Joe Gans, Philadelphia, Jack O'Brien, Mysterious Billy Smith, Kid Lavigne, George Gardner, Dixie Kid, Rube Ferns, Tommy West, Dan Creedon, Honey Mellody, and Joe Choynski, his was not a fitting end. Joe Walcott was born on March 13, 1873, in Barbados, British West Indies. On December 15, 1901, he stopped Rube Ferns in five rounds to capture the welterweight title. Ninety years later, the man nicknamed the Barbados Demon was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

Walcott's career began in 1890 and lasted through 1911. He engaged in 135 recorded pro contests, but Joe insisted there were many more. He failed in his first two attempts to win title recognition losing to lightweight champion Kid Lavigne in 1897, and welterweight champion Mysterious Billy Smith in 1898. After beating Ferns in 1901, he held the crown until losing to Dixie Kid in 1904. He reclaimed the title when Dixie Kid moved up in weight, but lost all recognition when he was defeated by Honey Mellody in 1906.

From his retirement in 1911 until 1935, Walcott worked at many different jobs. His boxing fortune had long since been depleted. Destitute he eventually surfaced in New York City. It was there that Mayor Jimmy Walker learned of Joe's plight. Walker was able to get Joe a job at Madison Square Garden. There Joe stayed for a month or so and then he vanished without a trace. "Barbados", Joe Walcott was a 5'11" freak of nature with a barrel chest and a reach equal to a much taller man. It was these physical attributes that enabled him to battle even heavyweights with success. Now he had disappeared without a clue to his whereabouts. His final resting place may never be known if it had not been for the efforts of Bill Cereghin, a devoted boxing fan from Defiance, Ohio.

Cereghin went on a mission to find the once great champion. In 1955, Bill's efforts led him to Massillon, Ohio some twenty years after Joe had last been seen. Massillon is a town famous for the exploits of their high school football team once coached by Paul Brown. In Massillon, Bill got the break he was hoping for. Someone remembered a person fitting Walcott's description working in a small town near Massillon named Dalton. When Bill arrived in Dalton, there was no sign or clue of Walcott. He searched the town cemetery with no luck. Finally a gravedigger led Bill to a Potter's Field on a small hill and said he remembered burying a person of Walcott's description who claimed he was once a great fighter. Bill then met with the undertaker who verified the gravedigger's claim. Joe had been walking one night and was hit by a car dying at the scene. Now satisfied that his search was over, Bill decided to try and dignify the unmarked grave. Bill found a slab of cement and with a black crayon wrote "Joe Walcott; died October 4, 1935, the date the undertaker had put on Walcott's John Doe death certificate.

This story was brought to my attention by Sal Marino, a boxing expert, from Niles, Ohio. Upon reading of Cereghin's search and discovery of Walcott's grave, Sal decided to pay Dalton a visit. Since Dalton is within a reasonable driving distance from Niles, Sal and his wife made the trip. At the cemetery they too found Walcott's place of rest. No longer was the grave marked with the crayon inscribed cement slab. It now has a small

but simple headstone. Did Bill Cereghin who was making an effort to collect enough money to buy a stone succeed? I am not sure. The story about Bill's search came out over thirty years ago. I have had no luck in my efforts to contact Bill. It is fans like Bill and Sal who take the time and effort to keep the memories of our boxing heroes alive. Mr. Boxing himself, Nat Fleischer rated Walcott the best welterweight of this century's first fifty years. How could a boxer that was bestowed such an honor be left unremembered in an unmarked grave? The boxing community owes Mr. Cereghin a debt of gratitude.

Again a special thank you to Mr. Sal Marino, the founder of LEGENDS OF LEATHER, Ohio's greatest boxing social club, for the information and pictures he sent to me.

JACK KINCADE

Jim Amato

