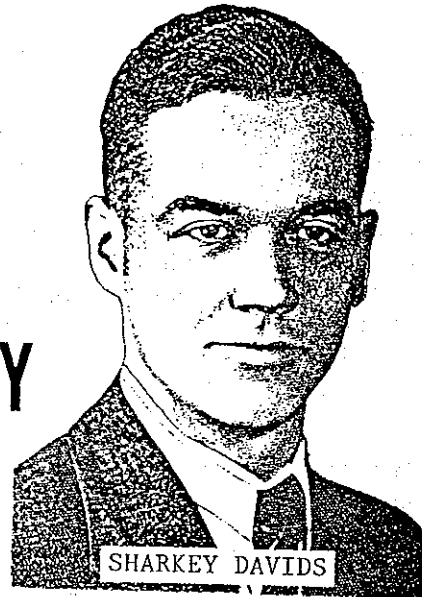




# SHARKEY



FORMER HEAVYWEIGHT BOXING CHAMPION JACK SHARKEY LIVES IN RETIREMENT in southern New Hampshire. He is all of 89 years old and has been out of the news for many years. I may be one of a small number who remember him and that is because he left a strange legacy for one of my brothers, Sharkey Davids, and for the rest of the family. Actually, my brother's first name is Marienus, which he still uses for legal purposes, but, for more than 60 years, he has been known as Sharkey. At a recent family reunion near the old family homestead at Kanawha, Iowa, I asked him to explain the origin of that nickname.

Speaking haltingly, but with remarkable recall, the 73-year-old farmer from Spring Valley, Minnesota, indicated the name originated in early 1928 when he was in the fifth grade at a one-room country school called Norway Township No. 3 in Wright County, Iowa. In those days, students walked to the school from farms within the square mile. Sharkey, or Marienus, as he was then known, walked with children of neighboring families. Then ten years old, he would pair off with brother Bill Davids, Harold Ruter, and Herman Christians, all 12 years old and in the seventh grade. On the way they would talk boxing and imitate the top fighters of the day.

Professional boxing was very popular at that time -- early 1928 -- thanks largely to Jack Dempsey's efforts to retrieve the heavyweight crown from Gene Tunney and losing by the famous "long count" decision in September 1927. He had knocked Tunney down in the seventh round but failed to go directly to his corner which delayed the referee's count and allowed Tunney additional seconds to recover. Caught up in the enthusiasm, the youngsters adopted the names of the prominent heavyweights of that period. Brother Bill, who joined our reunion conversation, said he wanted to be Dempsey, but Herm Christians latched on to that most popular name. Bill, who visualized himself as a hard puncher like Dempsey, settled for Tunney, then the champion. "That was kind of ironic because I wasn't fast on my feet like Tunney."

Fair-haired Harold Ruter became Tom Heeney, a New Zealand native fighting in the U.S., who had just fought Jack Sharkey to a 12-round draw and later in 1928 would fight Tunney for the title and lose. My brother Marienus then adopted Sharkey, who had attained prominence in July 1927 in a controversial bout with Dempsey. Sharkey was ahead on points in the seventh round but, while protesting a low blow to the referee, Dempsey knocked him out.

Why these four fighters? Brother Sharkey said they were prominently displayed in the Des Moines Register, and "Bert (our oldest brother) used to talk about them." Bert, who joined the conversation, confirmed that he followed boxing pretty closely at that time. "We didn't have a radio then -- rural electrification didn't come until 10-12 years later -- and I would sneak over to Tom Thorson's (a farm neighbor) to hear the fights on a battery radio." I raised the question that since our mother was German, "why didn't Sharkey adopt the name of Max Schmeling? Sharkey's response was that "he didn't think Schmeling was fighting that early."

This was essentially confirmed when I checked the Ring Record Book and Boxing Encyclopedia. Schmeling was fighting in Germany in 1928 and did not gain any recognizable fame until he fought in this country in 1929. Also, I noted that the 1927 year-end Ring rankings had Tunney first, Dempsey second, Sharkey third, and Heeney fourth. It all fit together. Note also that each fighter had a diminutive sounding ending to his name, which might have appealed to 10-12 year olds. "I wouldn't know anything about that," reflected Sharkey.

My next question was "Did you have any arranged fights at school where you acted out those fantasies?" "Oh, we might have squared off at recess and hit each other with winter mittens, but it was just for fun. Cora Anfinson was our teacher that year and she was fairly strict." I then asked "how long did this last with the four of you using the names of Dempsey, Tunney, Heeney, and Sharkey?" "Probably only that one year, except for me." Brother Bill stated that he didn't recall being called Tunney after 1928. Why did Sharkey's name stick and the others did not? "I guess my name (Mariusus) was more unusual than the others and Sharkey was easier to say." I volunteered the theory that it might have been because Jack Sharkey continued as a prominent fighter for several years after the others retired. He was heavyweight champion 1932-33, and retired in 1936 after being knocked out by Joe Louis.

My brothers were surprised to hear that Jack Sharkey is still living up in New Hampshire, not far from Boston where he had most of his fights. He marked his 89th birthday in October 1991 and is establishing some real age longevity for prominent pugilists. He has outlasted the other members of the 1928 quartet. Dempsey died at 87, Heeney 86, and Tunney 81. Two of the young students who assumed boxing names back in 1928 also have passed on. Farmers Harold (Heeney) Ruter and Herm (Dempsey) Christians, died in the Kanawha, Iowa, area in 1982 and 1983. I never talked to them about the childhood fantasy. Bill Davids is a retired farmer, now 76, and in poor health. He remembers when our family had a set of boxing gloves in the late 1930s, at which time he did engage in one less-than amateur fight at an abandoned country school used as a Depression-era recreation center. "I sure could have used some of Gene Tunney's speed and footwork in that fight," he recalls.

One final question for brother Sharkey: "Has it bothered you all these years that your family, past and present, as well as friends and neighbors, have called you Sharkey rather than Marienus?" "Not really; I got used to it. Sharkey is OK, but I don't like to be called Shark." I wish I had known that because back on the farm I'm sure I was sometimes guilty of the inevitable shortening of his name.

There is a "rest-of-the-story" to this tale. Just as Sharkey is not my brother's real name, the boxing champion also had a different name. He was born Joseph Paul Zukauskas of Ukranian parentage. When he turned pro in 1924, he was advised to change or at least shorten his name. He combined the names of two fighters he admired, Jack Dempsey and turn-of-the-century great Tom Sharkey, and thereafter was known as Jack Sharkey.

--- L. Robert Davids