Ringside seat

Virginia Schwietz, growing up in the famous Gibbons boxing family and working in law enforcement for years, had a unique perspective on St. Paul's raucous, romantic past.

By D.J. Tice, staff writer
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Virginia Gibbons Schwietz's father was a middleweight boxer. Her uncle was a heavyweight boxer. Her brother was a light heavyweight boxer.

"We went strictly by weights in our family," recalls Schwietz, 82, with a laugh. "We weren't ages, we were weights."

"I remember my Uncle Tom telling me once that a liver punch would immobilize your opponent for 10 seconds. This is the kind of thing all young girls learned at the dinner table, isn't it?"

Schweitz's unusual and prominent St. Paul family has produced a lifetime of exceptional experiences. Her father and uncle were the two most noted and accomplished prizefighters in Minnesota history. Later, her uncle's long tenure as Ramsey County sheriff led to Schwartz's own three-decade law-enforcement career, beginning in St. Paul's raucous gangland era of the 1930s.

Now the eldest member of her clan, Schwietz preserves memories of a colorful era in St. Paul's past – a time that was simpler, more gracious, and, in other ways, more troubled than our own.

The Phantom

The Gibbons family arrived in St. Paul in the 1880s, having traveled directly from County Mayo, Ireland, to join a growing community of Irish immigrants in Minnesota's fast-growing, ethnically diverse capital city. In 1887, Mike Gibbons became the first of the family's children to be born in America.

In those days – and for many decades to come – Irish-Americans were uniquely famed for their prowess in sports, not the least in boxing. Like the athletic prominence in later years of African-Americans, the early Irish zeal for sports may have had something to do with Irish immigrants being a disadvantaged minority for whom many career paths were closed.

The way Schwietz heard the story, Mike Gibbons' boxing career grew from a simple self-preservation instinct. "Some kids chased my dad one day," Schwietz says. "They had gangs in those days, too. He was afraid they were going to beat him up. He went down to the YMCA the next day and started taking boxing lessons."

Gibbons' teachers immediately noticed his lightning reflexes and disciplined "cleverness" as a boxer. He began fighting professionally in 1908.

To box professionally in Minnesota at that time meant to box secretly. Prizefighting

had been outlawed in the state in 1892 – one of many widely disobeyed prohibitions in that reforming era.

Mike Gibbons' early clandestine fights were staged by night in barns and warehouses. One took place in a deserted meeting room at City Hall. The fines he had to pay when caught were sometimes larger than the prizes he received for winning.

But Gibbons also traveled frequently to fight in other states, where boxing was legal and the prize money was good. He soon became prosperous and famous nationwide as the "St. Paul Phantom." Through him, the city earned a reputation as a boxing capital even while the sport was illegal here.

Gibbons' renown helped persuade the Minnesota Legislature to repeal the prizefighting ban in 1915.

By that time, Mike Gibbons had married, started a family and built a lovely home on Lake Como that still stands. His daughter, Virginia, was born in 1916.

Fancy footwork

"I don't remember my dad fighting," Schwietz says. She does remember growing up with five robust brothers in a home preoccupied with sports. Beyond discussions of liver punches, dinner was often interrupted for impromptu demonstrations of the finer points of left hooks and uppercuts, she says.

She remembers her father's cauliflower ears, a common disfigurement for even skilled fighters. Since her uncle had them too, Schwietz "thought they were perfectly normal."

When other children asked about his ears, Schwietz says her father would explain, "In my day, they had just come out with revolving doors, and we weren't used to them."

Schwietz remembers being the favorite of her "kindhearted" father, a "cheerful but quiet" man, while her mother doted on her often mischievous brothers. "It was a fun house," she says, remembering how their walkout basement served as a warming house for neighborhood ice skaters. She recalls hiding her younger brothers' toys and balls and suffering the retaliation of finding her Sunday hat with the brim cut off.

Every Sunday morning, Schwietz remembers, the Gibbons children would dress for Mass and rush off to the neighborhood Irish Catholic church in no particular order.

Their father "always came late," she says. "I don't think he ever knew how Mass started. He'd stand in the back of the church and cough, and every Gibbons kid would sit up straight. He hated rounded shoulders.

By the time Schwietz turned 6, her father's professional career had ended. While he had never had a championship bout, Mike Gibbons had earned the undisputed title as Minnesota's greatest boxer, suffering only a handful of defeats in some 200 fights.

Ranked among the greatest 100 American boxers of all time, Gibbons was known as a defensive, "scientific" fighter, as master of feinting, ducking and dancing his way out of the path of opponents' blows.

One exasperated challenger is said to have told his manager after a bout with Gibbons, "From now on, match me with one guy at a time." Gibbons himself said he always tried to remember "what feet are for – to carry you where you'd really like to be."

During World War I, the U.S. Army employed Gibbons' expertise to teach bayonet tactics to recruits, employing many of his boxing techniques. He taught the skills for many years at a gymnasium he ran with his brother in downtown St. Paul and wrote a widely circulated book on scientific boxing. In the 1930s, Gibbons even taught fighting techniques to St. Paul police officers. But for the cops, he emphasized more aggressive methods.

"When one of our boys meets a thug in an alley," Gibbons allowed, "he doesn't want to

box an hour to win a decision."

Schwietz says prizefighting in her father's day was more "honorable" and "gentlemanly" than people today, in the era of Mike Tyson, can probably imagine.

"They'd shake hands, and they meant it," she said, adding that there was then little boastfulness or belligerence among fighters outside the ring. When her father came home from an out-of-town fight, she says, "he'd get off the train and go over to his mother's to give her some money. Then, he'd go to the church and give the priest some money. Then, he'd come home."

More than just respectable, a boxer's family enjoyed considerable status, Schwietz says. "People would recognize the name" and be "totally impressed."

Tough times

The Gibbons name was immortalized in boxing lore even more by Schwietz's uncle than by her father, thanks largely to a single, legendary bout with Jack Dempsey.

Tommy Gibbons had long been her elder brother's sparring partner and protege. He adapted Mike's evasive, dancing style to the heavyweight ring, and by 1923 he had earned a championship match with Dempsey, one of the most awesome punchers in boxing history.

The fight was arranged by businessmen and land speculators in Shelby, Mont., a remote mining town. The promoters guaranteed Dempsey the eyepopping sum of $300,000. They hoped the sensational event would boost their town's fortunes and, not coincidently, make them rich.

Instead, the celebrated Dempsey-Gibbons fight bankrupted Shelby. Tommy Gibbons earned nothing beyond his expenses for his part in the bout. But he became the first challenger to last 15 rounds with Dempsey, who commonly made short, bloody work of his opponents.

Round after round, Dempsey chased Gibbons around the ring, only to be tied up by the challenger whenever he closed in. Dempsey won the decision, but Gibbons became a celebrity on the vaudeville circuit as the man who had gone the distance with the great champion.

Together with handsome earnings from subsequent fights, the fame Gibbons won in Shelby made him a wealthy man.

This same reputation for toughness and decency was the main qualification that helped Tom Gibbons win election in 1934 as Ramsey County sheriff. He sought public office, family members say, out of a desire to serve the community. He had held onto his wealth through the stock market crash of 1929 and early years of the Great Depression.

Mike Gibbons hadn't been so lucky. "It taught you something," Schwietz says of the Depression. "Before then, we had money. I never thought of money; we just had it. You could have anything you wanted. Then, all of a sudden, we didn't have any."

In those years, "we'd watch for Dad to get off the streetcar at night," Schwietz remembers. "If he had a package in his hands we weren't going to have macaroni and cheese for supper."

A package meant Schwietz's father had received payment for something and had stopped to buy a piece of meat or some other treat. Sometimes, the package he carried would contain only bones for the dogs, and the family would have only its disappointment to swallow.

Schwietz's mother eventually took control of the family finances, complaining that her husband was giving too much money away to destitute street beggars.

"'Pretty soon,' she'd say, '*We're* going to be begging on the street,'" Schwietz remembers.

Years later, Schwietz says, her father's funeral was well attended by "bums and bag ladies" he had aided.