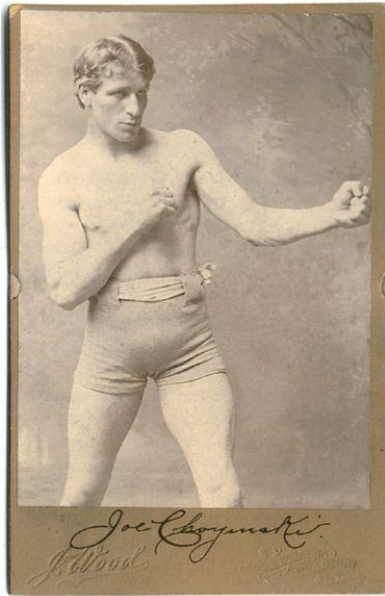


boxing

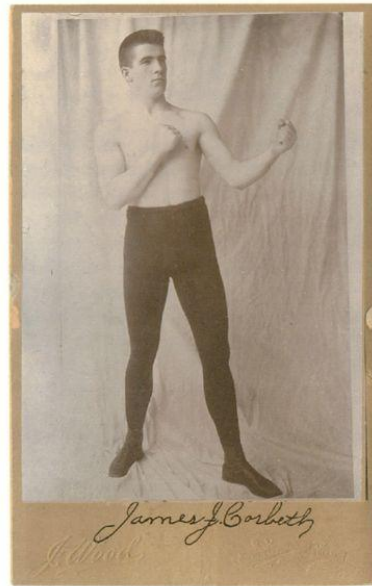
by don cogswell

**In** the late 20th century, a promotional convergence resulted from Muhammad Ali's protracted exile and Joe Frazier's emergence as the dominant active heavyweight, leading to several creative proposals to stage a showdown fight without completely breaking the law. One was to hold the bout aboard an airborne jet, flying over the US, beaming the contest to a worldwide close circuit audience. That never came to pass but a nineteenth century equivalent did, not in the air but on the water, off the coast of

# the Benicia. barge



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**S**AN FRANCISCO, A BOOMTOWN WRIT LARGE IN '49, SAW 50,000 overwhelmingly recent residents get rich and go bust through the manic years of the golden bubble. Over 800 ships lie abandoned in the harbor, many converted into supply stores for the mining masses. Hardware, tools, food and real estate speculation spiked, in fevers rarely seen, until crashing to a halt in 1857. That's when the Panic struck, dropping egg futures to the level of a hen's road clearance. Fourteen hundred murders were committed within SF's restricted confines, during the Gold Rush era, in just a six-year period. People got anxious but were reluctant to absorb their broken dreams in solitary desperation. A capital conviction total of three reinforced this judicial modus operandi. Then silver was discovered in Nevada, ushering in San Francisco's truly golden age.

Maybe it was the distance, certainly it was the money, but with miners crawling all over the high desert in another Territory, San Francisco built the refinements and cultural cachet that allowed it to be called the Athens, Paris or New York of the West. Rudyard Kipling, a man who prided himself on knowing his natives, wrote of SF in the 1890s,

"...a mad city, inhabited for the most part by perfectly insane people, whose women are of remarkable beauty."

A city that may have been in a Gilded Age but kept within reach the concealed revolver of its raucous past. It was in this social milieu that San Francisco gave birth to Joe Choynski and Jim Corbett.

**C**HOYNSKI, PRONOUNCED *coy-EN-ski*, WAS BORN into a Jewish family in San Francisco in 1868. Joe's Dad immigrated from Poland but no shtetl boy, he. The first Jew to attend Yale, Isadore Nathan Choynski was a newspaperman. Starting work on a local paper, Mr. Choynski soon started one, "The Public Opinion". A muckraker, a newspaper type practically unknown today, it targeted political corruption and anti-Semitism with a little nepotism tucked in. When Joe triumphed in amateur competition, father Isadore wrote:

"We are coming Father Abraham! The boys of the Jewish persuasion are getting heavy on their muscle. Many of them are training to KO John L. and it may come to pass. It is almost an everyday occurrence to read in our papers that a disciple of Mendoza has KO'd the best of sluggers, who point with pride to their ancestry. This week, a youngster who calls himself J.B. Choynski, 19 years old, native of this city, weighing 160 pounds, fought for the championship and gold medal with one well-knitted Irish lad of much experience...knocked him out in three rounds..."

Young Joe, between blacksmithing and candy pulling on the Barbary Coast, became the pride of the Golden Gate

The Yiddish phrase *a shandeh un a charpeh* translates roughly as a shame and a disgrace. It was applied to those sons of Abraham that pursued the dubious rewards of a career in pugilism and initially split the familial house of Choynski. Joe's father reveled in his son's boxing pursuits, seeing it as the physical counterpart to his intellectual fight against anti-Semitism. His mother's resistance was overcome by Joe's unmarked physiognomy and ample financial rewards in his early professional forays. Her take on the post-Corbett mayhem goes unrecorded.

Athletic Club. He turned pro in 1888 six days past his twentieth birthday.

**J**AMES J. CORBETT WAS BORN IN SAN FRANCISCO ON September 1, 1866. His father headed a large family, navigating his way through the City's commerce via ownership of a livery stable. Much like his future antagonist, young Corbett went in another direction from that of his self-made father, choosing the more genteel employment of bank clerk. That didn't keep him out of the streets. First engaging in organized saloon scraps, Corbett fell under the tutelage of English boxing trainer Walter Watson when he relocated his fistic adventures from taverns to the prestigious Olympic Club. (White-collar boxing goes back to its inception and these enthusiasts were the early backers of both Corbett and Choynski.)

Corbett turned pro in 1884 at the age of eighteen. He engaged in only one other professional bout up until 1888. (Choynski by then had fought three professional bouts) Noted trainer Bill Delaney piloted Corbett professionally, knowing a future champion when he saw one.

Both fighters were ambitious and both had tasted the notoriety and financial rewards possible in the fight game. (Choynski is reputed to have won \$1000 in his third professional fight, a tidy sum in 1889.) Their gentlemen club affiliates were natural rivals in The City. A blue collar Joe versus a white collar Jim was more nineteenth century spin than fact, Choynski having grown up listening to home visitors the likes of Mark Twain and Bret Hart. The "natural" rivalry of Jew against Irish added additional drawing power among the casual boxing fan. Both fighters had much to gain from this bout and its aftermath.

The California Athletic Club sponsored the fight, a bout that would go to a "finish". These types of bouts were illegal and a site was surreptitiously selected in a barn near Fairfax in Marin County. Both fighters trained in Marin, Choynski in San Rafael and Corbett in Sausalito. Hall McAllister, Jr. was part of the promotional group, well connected to the port town of Benicia. This would prove pivotal in the aftermath of the Fairfax fight.

## 2 The Barge Fight

Jim Corbett and Joe Choynski entered boxing's lists when both Irish and Jewish fighters would present formidable combatants, in all divisions of the sweet science, for decades to come. Corbett would face Sullivan in an all-Irish showdown for the greatest prize in sports. San Francisco would produce another ring great, right on the heels of Choynski's retirement, in "The Little Hebrew", Abe Attell, whose fight preparations, gambling till dawn before a bout, dovetailed nicely with his native city's approach to life.

On May 30, 1889, the bout commenced. Choynski stood 5'10", Corbett 6'1". Choynski weighed 160 pounds, essentially his weight throughout his prime. Corbett claimed 160 but newspapermen thought upwards of 180 more likely. This was a rematch of sorts; Corbett had won an exhibition in 1884 in the first round. (Jim was eighteen, Joe sixteen) After six spirited rounds the local constabulary intervened, halting the contest but not arresting anyone. The promoters scrambled for an alternative site. Benicia emerged as the most likely candidate. Reports state that Corbett broke his right thumb striking a blow against Choynski. The continuation was scheduled in six days on June the fifth.

**B**ENICIA, NOW A QUIANT bedroom community with an artistic cachet, was a bustling shipbuilding center in 1889. The Turner Shipyards claimed to have built more sailing vessels than any other yard in the country, 228 in 33 years. Benicia also supported a fishing community along with a thriving red-light district along the ways.



tively with the best in both America and England during his mid-century bare-knuckle era. Where doesn't the Sweet Science reach in its cultural impact.)

(A note on that artistic cachet. Mike Wittles, editor of studioNOTES, lives in Benicia and uses the nom de plume Benny Shaboy in his editing work. It's an intentional bastardization of "The Benicia Boy", aka John Heenan, who fought competi-

The Golden Gate is the only sea-level break in the coastal range of the Bay Area and this is where the maritime weather has it say. Following the water, the wind driven fog and low temperatures travel up the Carquinez Straits, pass Benicia, and end in dissipation in the Valley. June is a precursor to the fog's dominant reign in July and August, Twain's "coldest winter ever spent" being "a summer in San Francisco." All reports state the day of the fight was hot but to San Francisco natives this may have been a relative take on the day's environment.

To thwart the authorities a grain barge, anchored off Turner's shipyard in the Carquinez Straits, would blur the jurisdiction between Solano and Contra Costa Counties, the county line floating offshore in a drafts-

man's dream. The tugs Sea Queen and Redmond led several fellucas from Fisherman's Wharf, with 300 fight fans from the Embarcadero aboard, up the Bay to Benicia. Activities were scheduled to commence at noon.



The gloves used in the foreshortened bout in Fairfax were reportedly 2 ounce, with 3 and 5 mentioned for the continuation upon the waters. All accounts agree that a pair was lost, with Corbett insisting on the padded protection, and Choynski settling for driving gloves whose prominent stitching would leave their marks on Corbett's face.

**T**HE FIGHT BEGAN PREDICTABLY, with each fighter going to his strength. Choynski, the stronger man, continuously rushed Corbett, who used his excellent left jab and movement to control the action. Joe's propensity to bleed was seen early and the claret flowed by the Third Round. It was around this time that Corbett might have damaged his left hand as well. Improvising, Jim experimented turning the left to avoid the damaged knuckles. He's credited with fathering the left hook via this mother of necessity. Nonetheless, Choynski's pressure took a heavier toll and Corbett's left eye in particular responded to the onslaught.

By the Fourteenth Round neither fighter resembled the combatants that shook hands at noon. Joe's face was a mess, beach sand being thrown into the ring to absorb some of his blood. A torn lip was repaired with scissors between rounds. Both of Corbett's hands were broken. In that round Choynski almost ended things with a blow that left Corbett out on his feet. Only his great clinching ability and Joe's exhaustion got Corbett back to his corner where his brother Frank had to resort to fisticuffs to stop third

### The Barge Fight 3



brother Harry's weeping. (Drew "Bundini" Brown didn't plow as much virgin ground as it at first seemed.) Corbett answered Delaney's question to continue with "I'll pull through."

The fight went on. Delaney wrote:

"Several times the referee wanted to stop it and declare a draw, but neither man would stand for it."

By the Seventeenth Round, both native San Franciscan combatants, by unspoken mutual consent, had agreed to fight in the only shaded portion of the barge's ring. Most of the rest of the contest would be fought in this one spot. As the rounds ground on Corbett sensed Choynski weakening as he began his second wind. Feinting with straight, and impotent, rights, Corbett steeled himself to throw a fight-ending final hook. It landed and Choynski was counted out, the frame being the 27th. Corbett had to be carried to the tug berthed alongside.

Corbett, "Pompadour Jim", and most famously, "Gentleman Jim", went on to Sullivan and immortality. A subsequent in and out pugilist career, Corbett's attraction to the lights of vaudeville kept his bout total to nineteen. Choynski, "The Chrysanthemum" and "The California Terror", was a born prizefighter. Future opponents, some of which out weighed him by 40 pounds, included Sullivan, Bob Fitzsimmons, Tom Sharkey, Jim Jeffries, Peter Maher, Jack Johnson, Philadelphia Jack O'Brien and Marvin Hart. He had 79 bouts with 50 wins, half by knock-out. Arguably none were as tough as the Cor-

bett fight. IBRO historian Tracy Callis would put Choynski among the very best at Light Heavyweight, a division non-existent in his era.

Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain, headed West in 1861. Working the gold and silver business from both ends, as speculator and prospector, Twain failed at both. He did become a writer but by 1863 his acerbic pen made discretion a better part of valor and he left Nevada for San Francisco. With the encouragement of Bret Hart and Charles Farrar Browne he managed to expose local corruption and gain the wrath of the local constabulary. He retreated once again, this time to Angels Camp in the Tuolumne Hills, where the Jumping Frog Contest story lay in wait, which brought both a new voice to Twain and an end to his forced peripateticism. A friendship with publisher Isadore Choynski was a natural for Clemens and young Joe's upbringing was filled with the worldview of such luminaries.

Jack London made Benicia his stomping grounds in 1892; three years following the barge fight. He was sixteen years old and had journeyed up from Oakland. In Benicia he fished, poached and drank, eking out a subsistence existence. Many of his acquaintances were later transformed into fictional characters in his literary works. The Corbett-Choynski fight was woven into the fabric of this dockside culture, already achieving the embellishments of legend. Boxing would be a passion of London's throughout his life.

In 1901 in Galveston, Texas, Joe Choynski knocked out a green Jack Johnson in three rounds. Immediately following the stoppage Texas Rangers, who up until then had watched the contest, arrested both men for fighting an illegal "finish" fight. Choynski and Johnson served time together putting on daily boxing exhibitions for the local gentry. Joe is credited with providing Johnson with a finishing school master class on his way to boxing immortality.

Johnson achieved admission into that pantheon with his 1908 demolition of Heavyweight Champion Tommy Burns. Burns, odds on favorite entering the bout, carried a load of racial mythology and slander large enough to tilt Australia, where the contest was held. Johnson proceeded to smash every pugilistic stereotype, his dominance and insouciance up to the task. At ringside, now an acclaimed author of adventure yarns, was Jack London. He was covering the fight for the New York Herald and wrote

	TB	W	L	D*	KO
<b>JIM CORBETT</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>JOE CHOYNSKI</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>25</b>

\*Draws include No Decisions and No Contests

#### 4 The Barge Fight

"The fight, there was no fight. No Armenian massacre could compare with the hopeless slaughter that took place in the Sydney stadium today." London then led the parade for a white hope. Writing again in the Herald, he finished with "But one thing now remains. Jim Jeffries must now emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that golden smile from Jack Johnson's face. Jeff, it's up to you. The White Man must be rescued."



Jeffries fared little better than Burns. It would take exile, federal prosecution and age to defeat Johnson, Jess Willard doing the deed in 1915, when Jack was thirty-seven years old. At last London's great sports nemesis was defeated, a fighter taught some of boxing's finer points by an adolescent hero, Choynski. London died the following year, possibly a suicide, at forty.

The 1942 Warner Brothers film Gentleman Jim showcases the "barge fight" as a major action sequence in the movie. Within the context of a main stream Hollywood production, Errol Flynn's portrayal of Corbett is acceptable, Choynski's thinly presented persona less so. Essentially the film is a romantic fantasy, both in Corbett's personal life and late 19th century pugilism in general. It does take pains to include a number of historical occurrences that keep it within top 20 boxing movie lists. Included are Harry Watson at the Olympic Club, an important early Corbett bout with Jack Burke, Bill Delaney's piloting of Corbett, loss of the gloves at the barge, and more. Unfortunately the fistic sequence of events is as over the top as the Rocky series. (There are 7 knockdowns in one round with Flynn climbing out of the water in the following frame to KO Choynski.) Some behind the scenes nuggets include Billy Conn doing the footwork sequences shown repeatedly in the movie, Freddy Steele as Flynn's stand-in, and Mushy

Callahan chosen to train and condition Flynn for six weeks leading up to filming. (A final note on the conditioning. Flynn struggled to complete the regimen, collapsing twice at the Warner's gymnasium and possibly suffering a mild heart attack. While filming the boxing scenes, one minute was Errol's limit of endurance. In the real San Francisco era that he portrayed I'm afraid only Flynn's predilection for dissipation would come up to scratch.)



**T**HE LOCATION OF the barge fight today is in some ways little changed. The town of Benicia is no longer a fishing village, the Turner Shipyards are gone, but the Straits and the hills beyond look

much as they did in 1889. Remnants of the building ways can be found at the shoreline. Looking out at what remains of the docks, only the pilings remain. The past is palpable and near at hand.



### The Barge Fight 5





