

Eddie Williams— The Pride of Visalia

By Robert Carson

The dull glow of dawn was beginning to lighten the heavy California sky as Eddie Williams stirred in his bed. The weather had been cold and stormy, and he hadn't slept well during the night as there was much on his mind. Throwing back the heavy quilt, Eddie got up, stretched, and crossed the room to put his favorite robe on. It was Tuesday, February 22nd, 1910, a day many would not forget.

This was to be a big day for amiable Eddie Williams. He was slated to fight Kid Kenneth Harmon in a 15 round preliminary bout, preceeding the 45 round main event, which featured middleweights Loupe Carranza, San Jose, California, and Billy Burke, Philadelphia. Kid Kenneth was training with Carranza, with Williams working out with Billy Burke. The site was to be in Coalinga, California.

Eddie Williams fought under the name of "Ginger" Williams, the nickname coming from the unruly thatch of red hair that was parted in the middle. A smattering of freckles on his face, and he more than fit the name.

The Williams family had left the plains of Nebraska 16 years back to pursue the opportunities of California. Ginger was the oldest, at 22 with three brothers and four sisters.

Around his hometown of Visalia, California, "Ginger" was well known and liked by all. A quiet man by nature, the fighter had been stage manager and custodian at the local opera house, and also posted bills and advertising for many of the travelling show troupes.

"Ginger" had only three professional fights to his record, but the local sports all felt he had a terrific future in the ring. Much money had been wagered on this fight with "Ginger" having the slight edge in the betting. When he was training for his last fight he put three of his sparring partners down for the count.

Kid Kenneth Harmon used Coalinga and Bakersfield, California as a home base, and was the favorite among the oil field workers in that

area and commanded a big following also. Fighting for a few years around Denver, Kid Kenneth was a formidable looking man, with a flat nose, heavy brows, and a part down the center of his hair.

The only common opponent both fighters had fought was Jack Welch, which both men knocked out in San Francisco in 1909.

"Ginger" had trained hard at Hartford, and also gave appearances in a sort of vaudeville boxing sketch along with his manager, Jimmy Quinn.

Now as the day of the fight was upon him, "Ginger" Williams did some light exercises, and packed his equipment for the trip to Coalinga.

The weather was miserable and cold, but Eddie Burns' Coalinga Athletic Club, an open air arena, was crowded to capacity.

At 2:30 in the afternoon a roar went up from the crowd as the two gladiators made their way through the throng to the ring. Top notch middleweight Vic Hanson, from Devil's Den, was to referee.

"Ginger" Williams beamed as he glanced over the noisy crowd, spotting a friend here and there. Kenneth kept his gaze straight ahead, occasionally nodding to his second as a whispered instruction was given. Their robes removed, the boxers looked trim, both weighing 190.

At the opening bell both men came out of their corners caustiously, feeling the other out with jabs and parries. In the second round Kenneth started finding his mark, and clouded the big red-head with rights and lefts. "Ginger," in his enthusiasm, tripped and fell. Recovering, he fought back gamely, but was met by a furious attack from the tough veteran. At the bell "Ginger" wobbled back to his corner, where his seconds worked feverishly over him. Eddie Burns again reminded "Ginger" to box his man, not stand toe to toe and swap punches with him.

The third round was not fully underway when Kid Kenneth again started scoring with heavy punches to the head of "Ginger" Williams. Eddie Burns would later remember that the Visalia fighter, during a clinch, looked over Kenneth's shoulder

and smiled. Not a sickly smile, but one of a confident winner. He had taken a good punch from Kenneth, and was mad for ignoring Burns' advice to box the man. A hard exchange and "Ginger" went down. At the count of eight he rose, somewhat dazed and groggy. Kid Kenneth got in a solid punch and slammed Williams into the ropes.

From this point accounts of the fight vary, but with manager Jimmy Quinn ready to throw the sponge in, "Ginger" Williams went through the ropes.

One witness stated that as "Ginger" was on the ropes he had burnt his leg, as sliding down a rope burns ones hands. The burn surprised him and he stepped quickly, and slipped, falling through the ropes and out of the ring.

Another stated, that after balancing himself on the ropes, "Ginger" apparently became alarmed that he would be counted out. As he struggled to regain his footing, his feet slipped on the mat, and he tumbled out of the ring, head first.

In the fall, the fighter's head struck a protruding board, just below the left ear, and "Ginger" Williams, the pride of Visalia, hit the hard ground with a sickening thud. It was 2:45 in the afternoon, and for "Ginger," this battle, or any other, was over.

Ringside doctors rushed to the side of the still form lying on his face. They found the body stiff and rigid, but his pulse and respiration good. "Ginger's" eyes were dilated, and he seemed to be in a tremor. After a brief examination the injured fighter was rushed to the American emergency hospital in Coalinga. "Ginger" didn't show a flicker of consciousness as he lay on the examination table in his brightly colored trunks and shiny boxing shoes. It was apparent he had a fractured skull at the base of the brain, just under the left ear.

The hospital staff labored over the comatose boxer for hours. Two doctors were called in from Hartford along with every available physician in Coalinga. Finally at 10 o'clock that night it was decided that the only chance was to operate and remove the blood clot. The hospital



telephoned the shocked parents and were given permission to go ahead. After the operation and the clot was removed all the staff and well wishers just sort of sat back and waited.

Kenneth Harmon, his flattened pug-faced, twisted in grief, sat by "Ginger" Williams' bedside most of the night. The stricken fighter's condition never changed; his shock of red hair now in disarray, his fighter's face quiet and pale. His pulse still remained low.

"Ginger" Williams never regained consciousness after he fell headlong out of the ring on that fateful Tuesday afternoon. And though he stood little chance of survival, everyone felt as long as there was life, there might be a glimmer of hope.

At 2 o'clock Wednesday morning it was almost impossible to detect a

heartbeat, despite the fact there were faint signs of life.

Eddie "Ginger" Williams desperate battle with death finally ended at 4:45 that Wednesday morning, February 23rd, 1910.

Charles Williams, the father, arrived at the hospital a few moments before the death of his eldest son. An employee of the Etzenhauser Oil Company, He had not seen "Ginger's" mother for over two months. When told of his son's death, Charles Williams remembered how time after time he tried to dissuade the boy from being a fighter.

Looking down on his son, the father whispered, "I told him that if he put his face up for a target he'd have to take the consequences." Turning his back on the sheet-draped form, he remarked, "I therefore can place the blame on no one but the boy himself."

On hearing the news, the badly broken up kid Kenneth shook his head. "It is a terrible thing, and I'd never put another pair of boxing gloves on my fists. I don't even want to see a boxing match as I am done with the game forever.

"It couldn't have been the blow that killed "Ginger" as I hit him on the side of the jaw. He must have stuck his head in the fall from the ring. I don't see why they didn't stop the fight at the end of the second round, for he was all in then. I gave him all the wind I could. I walked away from him just before the finish, but as he stood there with his hands up the fellows from the ringside kept shouting for me to put him out, so I finished it."

Looking down at his feet, Kenneth added, "I have made no arrangements for bondsmen, as I don't believe that I can be held for anything. If I am arrested I expect the athletic club to look after me."

That afternoon an informal coroner's inquest was held. After hearing testimony from the father, ringside physicians, Kid Kenneth, and other witnesses, it was the unanimous decision of the jury that the death was accidental.

An interesting fact came to light from the testimony of Dr. R.B. Sweet, who told of reaching the fallen fighter, and finding him unconscious, the body rigid and the eyes dilated. he went on to say that an examination was made early that evening, but he couldn't tell whether the skull was fractured or not. He later performed the operation that removed the clot. After "Ginger's" death an autopsy proved that not only was the skull fractured, but an artery was broken, and the fourth cervical vertebrae was fractured, meaning the fighter's neck had been broken. One doctor stated that it was the fourth and the fifth vertebrae that were broken. In fact any event, "Ginger" didn't stand a chance to live.

Promoter Eddie Burns assumed all hospital, and nursing fees since the incident. Burns like the Visalia red head, and even payed for his training expenses, and funeral arrangements. He canceled all fights for two months out of respect for the popular "Ginger."

A younger brother, that had arrived in Coalinga, remained with the body to make arrangements for shipment.

Thursday morning dawned cold, and overcast, as the 6:30 train pulled out of the station for its slow trip back East. The pride of Visalia was going home for the last time.