

FACT IS STRANGER THAN FICTION

It was a bitter, cold December day in 1908 when a young reporter from the Kansas City Star approached the street cleaning crew. Why in the name of God did the Star send him on this assignment?

Boxing, and wrestling were enjoying a boom in Kansas City and the public just might like a human interest story.

Now what was his name? King? Yes, that's right! He was supposed to have been some sort of folk hero in the old prize ring circles.

The reporter approached the working crew; "Which one of those men is King. . . Jim King, I believe his name is? He used to be a prize fighter."

"King? Why that old man there with the white hair, that's Jim King; say, he never was a prize fighter, was he?"

The reporter shrugged, "Yes, from what I'm told he was a pretty good pugilist in the old gloveless days."

The grizzled street cleaner pulled at his mustache, "Well now, that's

said. "Yes, I'm King. I can't hear very well you know."

"Are you the King that used to fight back in the old days?"

"Fight? Yes, I used to fight, but my lord son, that was a long time ago."

"You fought Hicky, and O'Donnell?"

"Yes, Hicky, and O'Donnell. Steve O'Donnell. They were fighters. Why do you bring up that old stuff?"

"Well you see Mr King, my editor wants something with a little local colour . . . something about old Kansas City".

A trace of a smile flickered on the lips of Jim King, and his Irish blue eyes, clear, undimmed by the passing of years. He leaned on his spade, and his fellow workers slowly gathered around.

"They were good days in '69 and '70," he said. "Kansas City wasn't very big then, 'bout 15 000, I guess. When I came here the fightin' was good. I was a fighter. I was born in Ireland and raised in England. I

JIM KING - L THE BARE KN FIGHTERS....

news to me. I've known Jim King a good many years, but I've never heard him mention prize fighting."

A small bent figure was busily plying his spade into the dirt that had accumulated along the curbing of the street. He wore a heavy cap that all but concealed his hair; hair that was grey unto whiteness. A heavy red sweater under his coat showed that he was prepared for the cold. Not more than 5 feet 3 inches in height he looked like he weighed no more than 120 pounds. The young newspaper man could not help but wonder if this was the real Jim King, the Jim King that was the pugilistic terror some thirty years ago.

The old man straightened up, all but the stoop of his shoulders, he couldn't straighten that. "King!" he

came to this country in the spring of 1864 . . . You see I'm getting old now; an old man. I'm 60, or is it 67; I'm not sure. Before I left England I had one prize fight. When I got over here about all I did was fight. I went from New York to Cincinnati, and there I joined the army; the Fifth United States Cavalry."

"You were in the war?" the reporter interrupted.

"Yes, in the war. I joined in '64, the spring of '64, and I was with Phil Sheridan . . . you remember him . . . in Virginia. Some hard fightin' in Virginia, you remember. I was discharged in 1867, and I came straight to Kansas City. I've been here ever since."

The young newspaperman was getting impatient. "But your fights in the prize ring; how many did you

have?"

"Oh yes, those fights; I had five, but I quit in 1870."

Had it been that long? The memory of it was so clear . . .

It was June 22, 1869; Sunday; it had been raining, and the air was sultry; the elements were favourable.

Posters upon all street corners told how to get to the arena; at what hour it commenced, and upon what craft to sail. The little steamer Lizzie Campbell lay along the wharf at the foot of Main Street. She was to receive the visitors to the festival.

The crowd was not a large one. Two hundred at the least; two hundred and fifty at the most. A few faces were eager, pitiless faces; some scarred by stab, and blow. Blanched, a few of them from nights of play, and liquor; fierce, some of them, passion blown upon by gratification, and made devil-may-care in indifference; but scattered largely, and plentifully everywhere about the boat were the swells of a higher civilization . . . worthy

AST OF LUCKLE

STORY AND SKETCH
BY ROBERT CARSON

gentlemen of Kansas City.

At three rings of the bell the boat casts off. One mile above Wyandotte, at the woodyard, the boat lands, and takes on the fighters, and their seconds. John Hickey, a fighter from Ireland, his trainers, Charley Handley, and N.B. Gates. Hickey had slept there all night in a wagon, with a heavy overcoat wrapped around him, and a woolen comfort about his neck. Two miles farther up, at Brown's woodyard, the Campbell stopped again for Jim King, and Con Riordan, his trainer. Jim, with more luck than Hickey, had found a house to occupy. King was also dressed in wollen clothing, and muffled up.

As the boat passed up the river, spectators numbering 200 or more followed along the Kansas shore,

and along the railroad track to the scene of battle. Five miles above Wyandotte and one mile above Quindaro, on Sherman's farm, in Kansas. The boat halted to put off the ring makers, then pushed over to the Missouri side. The crowd was held back until all preparations were made.

Nature had formed for the fighters a natural arena. On one side huge bluffs shut it in; on the other side the tawny river flashed by, and between the two was the hard dry sand. The stakes had all been driven in, and the ropes stretched as the crowds dispersed from the boat.

Stripped to the waist, with the hot June sun shining fiercely down upon muscular arm, and heavy chest — the firm white flesh of the

would win. King replied, "I have only 50 dollars, but I will bet that."

A bystander held the stakes, and after tossing for corners the fighters waited for the call of time.

At six minutes to 4 o'clock time was called. Both came promptly to scratch, shook hands, then back to their prospective corners, then back to the center to commence battle.

In the first round both came out smiling. Hickey got in a heavy blow under the eye, and one under the chin. King went down. King received two cuts; one over the left



men glistened, and shone. Jim King showed the best; weighing 127 pounds, while Hickey at 121, seemed a trifle too fleshy, and about him wasn't that clean-cut appearance that stood out from King's massive muscles, and sinewy arms. Around his waist Hickey wore a green belt supporting a pair of white tights, while King was wearing a white and red sash, and white tights.

As soon as preliminaries were arranged, Hickey with a roll of bills in his hand went to King's corner and offered to bet 100 dollars that he

eye, and one on the chin. First blood, and first knockdown for Hickey; the time being 34 minutes.

In the second round Hickey was struck over the left eye, and sent to the turf, bleeding.

continued overleaf

Continued from page 31

King was bleeding profusely when the third round began, but undaunted, knocked Hickey down again within 2½ minutes, while the pro-King crowd cheered loudly.

When the sixth round began both men showed signs of fatigue, with Jim King bleeding badly, yet surprisingly fresh. After absorbing severe body blows, Hickey was thrown violently in his own corner.

The ninth round commenced with the fighters coming to scratch quite slowly. After slight exchanges King suddenly struck Hickey a terrible blow to the head which staggered him. Recovering quickly Hickey hit King with a hard right which put King down.

When the tenth was called, Jim King did not respond. The magnificent body, which all thought unbeatable, failed to respond. A sponge finally was thrown into the ring signifying defeat. The total time of the fight was 40 minutes.

After gathering all their belongings; spectators, and combatants boarded the boat for the trip back. On examining the damage done; Hickey found he had a cut on the back, and a cut over his left eye, received in the third round. King, with a cut over his eye, and chin, also had a cut on the neck.

The whiskey flowed freely during the trip back up the river. Hickey took up a collection for Jim King, who sat nursing his injuries. Handshakes, and drinks were exchanged, with talk of a return match. When the Lizzie Campbell docked at 6 o'clock everyone was well into the liquor... a grand day

"Mr King, Mr King, now you said Hickey beat you fair and square."

The clouds in the southwest were turning an inky blue, with a smell of snow in the air.

"What! What was that you said," Jim King said with a start.

"I ask you what were the roughest fights you ever had."

The wind was beginning to stir, and an occasional flake of snow would float down. The younger man was anxious to get this over with, and return to the warmth of his office, and a healthy belt of bourbon.

Jim King looked down at his feet, "The roughest huh. Well now lets see. Don't rush me young fellow, this was a long time ago. Probably the best remembered was the Steve O'Donnell fracas. That was the one that some said was a frame-up."

Jim King's memory was very clear on that day 38 years ago.

It was fought on February 21, 1870. At an early hour in the morning, the sporting fraternity

assembled at the saloon of Harry Smith, at the corner of Main Street, and the Levee, and also at the depot saloon of Mike Fitzpatrick, situated in the bottom at the foot of Bluff Street, opposite the Union Depot. From this point there were horse drawn "buses", in readiness to take the curiosity seekers to the fight. The point of destination was unknown except to the initiated, although it was generally believed to be in Kansas.

Along the road there were numbers of carriages, buggies, men on horseback, and even some on foot.

The fighting ground was situated about two miles and a half from the city limits, in which was known as the Kaw River bottom. Scattered about were close to 400 people from all stations, and positions in society. The ring was formed about forty feet from the state line, with a "worm" fence dividing Kansas from Missouri.

The day was fine. The sun shone brightly, and its rays were warm enough to neutralise the cold temperature.

At 8 o'clock the men, accompanied by their seconds, entered the ring. Steve O'Donnell stood about 5 feet 6 inches, and weighed in the vicinity of 123½ pounds. His age was apparent at a glance, he being about 39 years old. He had a determined face, which bore a hard look. Jim King at this time was 23 years old, 5 feet 6 inches in height, and weighing 132 pounds. His face was devoid of hair, and exhibited youth, compared to the rough hewn O'Donnell.

King was undressed, and dressed for the ring by a man named McCormick, while O'Donnell was undressed by Jerry Connell. Both men being now stripped to the waist, and dressed in knee breeches of mouse colour, stepped to the center of the ring O'Donnell drew out fourteen dollars and offered to bet it that he would win the fight. The amount was covered by King, then both stepping back to their corners again advanced, and shook hands.

The first two rounds found the veteran O'Donnell sent to the grass. In the third O'Donnell drew first blood, but was again sent to the ground. As the fifth round ended O'Donnell had to be carried to his corner. O'Donnell, with a damaged left eye, was knocked down again at the end of round nine. O'Donnell, somewhat tired, and King apparently fresh, were both sponged off.

At the beginning of the fifteenth round O'Donnell's left eye was nearly closed. King again came forward, and for the fifteenth time sent O'Donnell down, but now a foul is claimed for O'Donnell. The

frustrated referee decided that King had in fact committed a foul, inasmuch as he struck O'Donnell while he was still on the ground.

The stakes 100 dollars by now, were placed in O'Donnell's hands.

A roar of disapproval rose from the crowd. King was such an obvious winner. After minutes of milling about, the spectators dispersed, and started back toward the city. The interested on-lookers who were up in trees, or standing on the hillside came down and took to wagons and carriages or the backs of horses, others by foot. The big event had come to a sad close.

"Yep! That's right; knocked him down fifteen times, and I still lost. You shoulda heard that crowd when the referee raised ole Steve's hand. Why hell, I think O'Donnell was more surprised than anyone. It wasn't fake as far as the fighters were concerned, just the referee, and the people with the money who were against me."

The young newspaperman shifted his weight, "Did you make any money in the prize ring?"

"Sure, made lots of money, but I didn't save it. I was young in those days, and well, you know what I mean? I quit shortly afterwards and started to work "jobbin" meat for Armour. You ask me what am I doing here? Well, the Kaw river floods, bad judgement, and hard times cost me all my property in Armourdale. You know I have never seen a glove fight, I guess I lost all taste for fighting."

The snow had begun to fall, its silent descent almost being heard.

Closing his notebook, the young man shook hands with the small stooped figure, "I sure want to thank you for your time Mr King. I'll see if we can use this."

The other labourers had long since scattered, and were busy gathering up their tools.

A horsedrawn taxi came into view. "Taxi! Taxi! Here, over here."

Stepping into the carriage, the reporter waved, and was off in a swirl of snow dust. He glanced back at the lone figure standing by the curb. Reaching into his heavy coat he drew out a flask, and took a long drink from it. The warmth of the bourbon felt good. Glancing back again the little ex-fighter was lost in the heavy fall of snow.

Don't miss next

month's article

**"DEATH STALKS
THE RING!"**