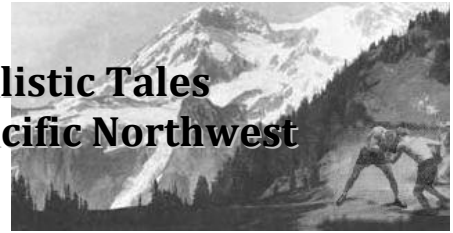


Pugilistic Tales of the Pacific Northwest



When You're Through, You're Through

The Saga of Spark Plug Boyd and Frank Farmer

by Ric Kilmer

In the era of the first flights to outer space, elongated tailfins, and “Leave It to Beaver,” he could be found in a downtown Seattle tavern, not far from the Crystal Pool—the site of many of his triumphs. How the old-time fans at “the Pool” had adored him, this veteran of the broken beak club, slapping him on the back as he left the ring bloodied and bruised, yet still clowning—win, lose, or draw. “Oh, you Sparkle!” they would shout. Never a world champion, or even a contender, he had been simply a crowd-pleasing, working-man’s prize-fighter. Now, after so many, many years of countless blows to the head and body for the entertainment of those fans, here he was, in the twilight of his life, living precariously on Skid Road, a worn-out shell of his former self.

The man was a celebrity on the Skidroad until—maybe until the last six months, come to think of it. When he was a celebrity he took the bows with modesty. When he was not he acted as all forgotten heroes.

He developed a little act—harmless enough, surely. He’d rub his right thumb against his nose, in the manner of all boxers everywhere. He’d extend his hands, and jab with the left, and cross the right, and fan the air with lefts and rights and make with fancy footwork.¹

“I’m Spark Plug Boyd. Spark Plug Boyd, the fighter. Ever heard of me?” he would ask of the patrons smoking and drinking in the darkness. Few did, any longer. Yet there remained some who vaguely recalled that it was Spark Plug Boyd who had “killed” Frank Farmer way back when.

Woodward Tending was born June 19, 1906 in Hardin, Missouri, to Frank and Sarah Tending. According to the United States Federal Census records, he was living in Carroll, Missouri by 1910. He grew to become a “wild kid” and, as a result, was eventually sent to a reform school, then later paroled to a Kansas farmer.

“Let’s say I was 12 at the time though I ain’t sure,” Tending said. “I know I was big for my age and strong and that I could do a man’s work and that’s what the farmer expected.”

Tending admitted he wasn’t one of the smartest kids who ever lived. He worked in the corn under the hot Kansas sun for poor room and board and with nary a complaint or thought of the future.

Then he heard he could make as much as \$2 a day for similar work in the blue world beyond.

He fled the farm. Joined up with a gang of harvest stiffes heading west. He never saw or heard of the farmer again—nor of his father, mother, sisters or brothers.²

Tending continued moving westward until he found work logging in the over-cast, misty rain forests of the upper-western corner of America, near the twin cities of Hoquiam and Aberdeen, Washington—which hug the waters of Grays Harbor.

Aberdeen had risen from the ashes of the Great Fire of October 1903 that destroyed the central business district, leaving three people dead, to become one of the most important timber towns in America. By 1907 the Grays Harbor area was shipping lumber to places as far away as China. The first cranberries were planted May 1913 in the swamps near the area's ocean beaches, with the Ocean Spray cooperative eventually building a processing plant nearby. Fishing and shipping were the other major livelihoods. (Aberdeen became the birth-place of Kurt Cobain in 1967. The singer/songwriter/guitarist would form the hugely popular "grunge" band Nirvana in 1987 with Krist Novoselic in their hometown. The city later placed a welcome sign along the main highway leading into town that still reads to this day "Come As You Are," in recognition of one of the band's more-popular songs. Guitarist/singer Patrick Simmons, of the Doobie Brothers band, was also born in Aberdeen. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, the Grays Harbor area "suffered through a long decline" while its timber and fishing industries were dying; but, as of 2008, it is hoping to "reinvent itself as an unlikely leader in the state's alternative energy movement with the establishment of new environmentally-friendly industries."³)

Unregulated boxing had been conducted here-and-there throughout Washington since its admission to the Union in 1889. But whenever a boxer died due to injuries sustained in the ring there would be renewed efforts to outlaw the sport. The July 3, 1905 death of Fred Ross while fighting in Aberdeen became the state's first ring fatality and created the biggest headlines the city's paper ever created to that date.⁴ A year later, on Sept. 28, 1906, the ring-death of San Francisco's Johnny Crowe, from his bout with Billy Snailham at the Everett Athletic Club, was just too much too soon and shut down boxing throughout the state for over a year. But, by 1908, boxing was "booming" throughout the Pacific Northwest in general.⁵ Nevertheless, in 1909, the Washington state legislature adopted Section 2556 of Ballinger's Code, page 1181, Vol. I:

PRIZE FIGHTING, AIDING, BETTING OR STAKE-HOLDING:— Every person who shall engage in, instigate, aid, encourage, or do any act to further an encounter or fight with or without weapons, between two or more persons, or a fight commonly called a ring or prize fight, or an encounter commonly called a sparring match, with or without gloves, or who shall send a challenge or acceptance of a challenge for such an encounter or fight; or who shall carry or deliver such a challenge or acceptance, or shall train or assist any person in training or preparing for such an encounter or fight; or who shall bet, stake or wager money or other property upon the result of such encounter or fight; or hold or undertake to hold any money or other property so staked or wagered, to be delivered to, or for the benefit of the winner thereof, shall be guilty of a gross misdemeanor: Provided that nothing in this section shall be so construed as to interfere with members of private clubs sparring or fencing for exercise among themselves.

But this new criminal prohibition did not prevent those who still wanted to be entertained by *real* boxing. Because of that "escape clause" at the very end of this statute—allowing for sparring or fencing among members of private clubs for exercise and, by extension, for the enjoyment of their fraternal brothers—"professional" bouts hereafter in the state were usually held in the various American Legion, Eagles, Elks and other private athletic clubs for "members" to engage in and enjoy watching. Anyone wishing to witness a match was required to obtain a membership card and levied an assessment for the seat. Boxers—including professional prize-fighters from other states, where boxing *was* legal, who were passing through Washington state on a boxing tour—were merely reimbursed "training expenses," promoters would claim, if pressed by local police or anti-boxing clergy. But the authorities generally turned a blind eye to these bouts, as prize-fighting was hugely popular for most people of the state.

So, it was not unusual during this era for Washington-state boxers to fight both "professional" (meaning that the boxers were in fact paid money and the bout results were to be included in the boxer's official fight record) and truly amateur bouts early in their careers. Pugilism in the state continued under this system for years to come, with the occasional effort to make professional boxing legal. But the ring fatalities of Carl Ensen (while sparring at Tacoma in 1911), Jack Newton (Seattle, 1915), and Jabber Neiss (Seattle, 1916), did not help matters whatsoever. (Prize-fighting *was* eventually legalized in 1933.)

Then the United States entered World War I in April 1917. Half of all the spruce wood required by America during the war came from the Grays Harbor area; its loggers cut 132 million board-feet for airplane stock alone.⁶ When the war ended, the greater Harbor area (which includes the nearby fishing town of Westport—where future middleweight champion Freddie Steele retired and died) welcomed home its soldiers, in April 1919. Many returned to their logging, shipping, and fishing jobs. And they wanted to enjoy *pro* boxing, which was increasingly gaining post-war popularity throughout the country, eventually rivaling baseball as the nation's favorite sport.

By 1923 Ted (Krashing) Krache, the “Harbor Horror,” who had started boxing professionally the year before, had become the most popular fighter in the Grays Harbor area. He would have a highly-popular series of bouts with a rival logger—Dode Bercot of Monroe. Krache was managed by Dick Large, who also put on monthly shows in the area—usually at the Grand Theatre in Aberdeen, and held under the auspices of the local aerie of the Fraternal Order of Eagles. Nick Randich (not the local boxer, originally from Austria, but who shared the same name) was the matchmaker for these shows. They became known as the “Nick and Dick” combination.⁷



Ted Krache

At the same time, Bob Oliver was putting together cards for Hoquiam's American Legion Athletic Club at the Electric Park Pavilion, with Large as his matchmaker and as the club's manager. (Billy Wright, a Seattle welterweight boxer, would become the new matchmaker—starting with the March 25, 1924 show—after having visited the area the previous summer and purchasing an interest in the Legion's boxing club.⁸) King Vanucie was often the referee for all these Aberdeen and Hoquiam shows. Or there would be referees from neighboring cities invited to officiate.

Meanwhile, future light-heavyweight contender Leo Lomski was living in an Idaho mining town and having the occasional bout. He would relocate to Grays Harbor by 1925, making it his home until his death fifty years later, to become the most popular boxer ever to have been headquartered here.

It was around this time that a Harbor-area logger named Woodward Tending (who apparently also went by the name of “Joe Boyd”) decided to become a boxer—not content with the \$2.00 to \$5.00 a day he was likely making in the Olympic rain-forest. Boxing promised bigger paydays. (A main-event boxer in this area, at this time, could make around \$500 a bout.⁹ And he often fought at least once a month.)

His first workout was, well, impressive enough. “What's the handle?” one of the men in the gym asked him when it was over. Woodward Tending? That would make them laugh, all right. “How's for a name to remember? Boyd? Spark Plug Boyd—that's a dandy.”¹⁰

At first, the newly-christened Spark Plug Boyd engaged in weekly amateur shows at the Lotus Club in Aberdeen.¹¹ The first documented mention of a boxer named “Battling Spark Plug” was in the August 23, 1923 *Hoquiam American*, announcing an upcoming Labor Day show—the first professional card (“smoker”) of the season by the Eagles Athletic Club—to be held at the Grand Theatre, with Randich as matchmaker, and Seattle's old-time referee Art Schock brought in to referee the entire card. *Ted Krache vs. Young Carmen* was the scheduled main event. It is very likely that this was to be Boyd's professional debut, although neither local paper explicitly said so. He was scheduled to meet Walter Krache—the older brother of Ted. The papers *did* mention, however, that this was to be Walt Krache's pro debut. “These brethren had an [earlier] encounter at the Eagles' picnic, therefor [*sic*] each knows the other's prowess and Spark Plug has vowed that he will go thru Krache like a bolt of lightning thru dutch [*sic*] cheese.”¹² They were to be the “curtain raiser”: the four-round preliminary bout opening the show.

Krache “had the edge” over Boyd in the first round, but “the lad with the electric name came back vigorously and won the draw.”¹³ Later on this card, Krache's brother Ted also drew, after six rounds with Carmen—while, in the six-round semi-final, Stanley Willis of Portland scored a third-round technical knockout over Ray Evans of San Francisco after his opponent's seconds tossed in a towel to save him from further punishment; heavyweight Ira Roberts (the “pride” of the Saginaw logging camp) lost by

second-round KO to fellow logger Jack Healy in the four-round special event; and bantamweight Indian Pete of Hoquiam got a KO-3 over Irishman Eddie O'Hara of Olympia in their four-rounder.

The fans missed King Vanucie as referee. King is one good performer, calls the turn as he sees it but became tired of the panning of certain fans who have never boxed themselves and are therefore unacquainted with the finer points of the game.¹⁴

The American Legion club's matchmaker, Dick Large, put Spark Plug Boyd and Battling O'Hara on his up-coming September 18 show—to be held at Hoquiam's Electric Park Pavilion, with *Sailor Liston vs. Young Dudley* as the featured bout. O'Hara "did not like Spark Plug's stinging rights and lefts, and in the second, after receiving a hard jolt, looked about for a soft spot, saw it and did a submarine."¹⁵

Boyd was next scheduled to meet Herb Frank, a member of the Quinault Tribe from nearby Taholah. (There was a substantial Native American population in the area, and boxing was popular among these folks as well.)

[Frank] should either be sent to dreamland or made to dog it in one round by Spark Plug Joe Boyd of Aberdeen, providing "Barney Google's" favorite travels at the clip he has been showing to date. Spark Plug is the greenest kind of scrapper, but he's a Jack Dempsey compared to Frank, who is not even a fair "set up."¹⁶

Someone must have been listening because, instead of Herb Frank, Boyd met Swede Anderson of Portland, Oregon, on October 15, at the Electric Park Pavilion, in a four-rounder.



Spark Plug Boyd

Spark Plug Joe Boyd of Aberdeen doubtless has been appropriately nick-named, but the fans are unanimous in their verdict that he provides plenty of action in his every start. Pitted against Anderson of Portland, Spark Plug went at his task with a vengeance and earned the decision. Anderson hit Sparky with everything but the stools, the water buckets and the ring poles Monday night, but the "Old Skate" refused to break ground and was in there fighting every second. Until Spark Plug runs up against some hard puncher, he will continue a fixture on the smoker cards as he is an attraction and some of the coin that rolls in is brought there by the eccentric fellow.¹⁷

All this time, Boyd continued to have amateur bouts once a week at the Lotus Arena.¹⁸ The Lotus boxing club, "far from hurting the established smokers," served as a "testing ground for preliminary boys," and thus removed "much of the gamble that always exists in bringing in some unknown merely on the strength of some letter."¹⁹ Matchmaker Nick Randich then paired Boyd with boxer Nick Randich. "Randich has a ring record which dates back ten years and is said to be pretty tough."²⁰ He had been born as Nick Marchina in Austria. Somehow he ended up in Aberdeen, but left the town around 1914 to visit his former home in Austria. His timing was poor, because World War I then broke out. He was drafted by the Austrian Army and sent to battle the Russians. He was captured and spent three years as a prisoner-of-war. When he was eventually released, he went back to Austria in 1917. He was then sent by the Army to fight on the Halian Front. After the war ended, he traveled some more before returning to the Pacific Northwest in December 1922.²¹

Nick modestly acknowledges that he is thirty, but some of the old time fans of the Harbor who saw Nick knocking them cold fifteen years ago, wonder whether he hasn't his age too high. However, he was always a drawing card, and old timers will enjoy seeing him play the Fitzsimmons act on his younger opponent.²²

Boyd won the decision. Marchina “had plenty of courage but that and a wide streak of fat around his waistline is all he had against Spark Plug Boyd. Spark Plug should be matched with Soldier Woods and the fans would see a panorama that would be worth the price of admission alone.”²³ (Woods, from the northern Seattle suburb of Bothell, was known as a “cave man” of boxing—a ring comedian who employed wild swings and locomotive tactics. His trademark was to somersault and turn handsprings as he left the ring after a fight. He was once labelled the “champion clown of the Pacific coast.”²⁴)

Grays Harbor’s own eccentric and clowning boxer, Spark Plug Boyd, then won his first six-rounder, over Bill Mullen, on November 19. Next, he had his first bout beyond the Harbor area,²⁵ when he went to Tacoma and got a TKO over Young Stanley Ketchell. He then had a few more bouts in Tacoma and Olympia, before heading north to Seattle to face Fred Cullen March 4, 1924, at the Crystal Pool—a natatorium located at Second Avenue and Lenora in the Belltown district. “The Pool” was a giant bathhouse that pumped in heated saltwater straight from Elliott Bay (Puget Sound), and existed as a public swimming pool from 1915 until it closed down in the late 1930s. It had been designed by B. Marcus Priteca, known as a leading designer of movie film theaters, and was built on the former Bethel Temple. Its inaugural boxing show had been held on Nov. 5, 1917, when promoters Lonnie Austin and Dan Salt leased the south end of the building, drained the pool, and installed a ring platform and bleachers seating 2,000 people around the empty pool.²⁶ Thereafter it offered boxing cards in the fall and winter seasons, due to the lack of in-door air-conditioning enjoyed today and the popularity of baseball during the spring and summer. It was also a roller-skating venue in the winter. By 1920 the venue was controlled by the Metropolitan Building Company, at a time when Seattle boxing had “hit a snag.”²⁷



Spark Plug Boyd suffered his first career loss, at the hands of Fred Cullen. According to the day-after *Seattle Daily Times*, the bout “never should have been staged. Boyd is only a novice and so far as the science of boxing is concerned, he hasn’t the slightest idea what it is all about. His face looked like a puffball at the end of the first round; he was knocked down and all but put out in the second and in the third Referee Ted Whitman mercifully stopped the go and gave the decision to Cullen.”

Boyd won his next bout, over Danny Needham in Walla Walla, then drew with Eddie Shelton in Tacoma, before returning to the Harbor area by May of 1924. (He may have had other bouts during this time that have not yet been discovered by researchers.)

“Spark Plug Joe Boyd, whose clown stunts won him quite a following on the Harbor and whose appearance on a bill assures many good laughs, has been signed for the semi-final with Harry Huson of Tacoma, and this should be a good number.”²⁸ However, Boyd met Young Jack Dempsey of Puyallup instead, and lost by TKO, although he was now “a much improved fisticuff artist, but still possessed of clownish antics.”²⁹

Around this time boxing in the Grays Harbor area had gotten a black eye. Back in May, Everett’s Travie Davis was suspected of throwing a bout with Ted Krache, by seemingly quitting in the second round, claiming that he had sprained his ankle. Doctors later determined that he had in fact sprained his ankle, thus his withheld purse was given to him.³⁰ But that did not stop some “prominent patrons” to call for the establishment of a Boxing Commission.

The sport of boxing holds a commanding place in the affection of the sports-loving public on Grays Harbor, and it has been growing tremendously in popularity in the last few years, particularly since Krache came into the limelight. However, there is strong possibility of a serious setback should another fluke spring up in the near future. It has required constant nursing by Randich and Large to bring boxing to the present high plane, and it would be regrettable should something occur to wipe out in one evening

all the good work of years. A boxing commission on Grays Harbor, while it would not be guaranteed insurance against flukes, would at least afford splendid protection and would allow the public to understand it is being represented in the match-making and is being protected in every possible way.³¹

But it seems that nothing ever became of this proposal.

Aberdeen's eccentric light-heavyweight logger/boxer became more adept at pugilism. For the next four years, Spark Plug Boyd fought all over the Pacific Northwest, amassing a respectable record for a journeyman. Then, on July 19, 1928, he was scheduled to meet Frank Farmer for the first of what was to become a trilogy of bouts the two would have together.

Frank Farmer was one of the most popular boxers to have ever come out of the logging camps. His father, Sam M. Farmer, and mother had moved from Kentucky to Washington around 1886. His parents lived in Sumner, where the future boxer was born and lived until he was ten-years-old, when they moved to nearby Tacoma. Farmer attended Hawthorne, Longfellow and McKinley elementary schools in Tacoma. By March 1913, he had ten siblings: seven brothers and three sisters.³²

[Farmer] learned to fight by scrapping the kids that laid for him around the back lots of the Longfellow school.... "I was tall and awkward, and I guess I looked queer with my cap perched on top of my head. Anyhow, it seems that every kid, big and small, thought that cap was there to be knocked off. And for a long time it got knocked off pretty regularly, until I took a notion to fight. Somehow it never occurred to me to turn and give battle, but one day when the Longfellow boys were running me home (a usual stunt) I turned on the fleet footed leader and licked him before the main body came up. I beat it another two blocks, turned on another kid who had outdistanced his companions, and beat him likewise. I repeated that four times before I reached home for dinner—and of course my appetite was quite good. But that is how I learned to fight."³³

The March 8, 1913 and July 4, 1929 editions of the *Tacoma Daily News* both reported that Farmer started his professional boxing career July 4, 1911, in the town of Eatonville—in a six-round no-decision bout with an Eddie White of Raymond, Washington. However, a March 25, 1930 piece—written by long-time acquaintance and local sports-writer Elliott Metcalf—from one unidentified Tacoma paper, stated that Farmer "fought his first glove fight in 1907—23 years ago—and won by a knockout, but he dropped the game until 1910, when he again marched to the glove wars—then a thrilling adventure for him...."

Nevertheless, according to his career record, as presently documented, Farmer had his second pro bout over a year later—on Sept. 14, 1912, again in Eatonville—according to the Oct. 14 and 21, 1912, and March 8, 1913 *Tacoma Daily News*. Most of his early bouts were held in the small towns of Eatonville, Selleck, Centralia and Enumclaw. (During this early period of his professional career, Farmer had quite a number of bouts with Joe Bonds of nearby Tacoma. Bonds would lose to future World Champion Jack Dempsey in 1916.)

Farmer became known as a smart fighter who brought experience and ring brains to his craft, as well as physical strength. He usually employed a "standup" style of boxing, but could fight out of a crouch as well. According to Metcalf, he could master all but a small group of fighters of the land. In the history of Tacoma boxing, Farmer was undoubtedly the city's longest-running main-event attraction. After professional boxing was shut down by most local authorities on the West Coast for almost a year throughout 1912, it was Frank Farmer that Tacoma's Fraternal Order of Eagles promoter, George Shanklin, called on to headline the first experimental four-round bootleg card, when boxing returned in early 1913. (Farmer came through by winning the decision over Billy Ross.)

When the authorities agreed to allow six-round bouts later that year, Shanklin chose Farmer for top billing in the main event. Again the logger came through with the victory. Over the years Farmer would box not only at Eagles Hall but at many other Tacoma venues—such as the Moose Hall, the Glide Rink,



Tahoma Hall, the Auditorium, Greenwich Coliseum, and the Garden Athletic Club. During one season, Farmer fought as the main attraction on nine straight Eagles' boxing cards without losing a bout.

A newspaper article in Farmer's scrapbook, that survives to this day, reported that he was once a sparring partner for soon-to-be heavyweight World Champion Jess Willard:

Farmer was at Willard's training quarters in El Paso, Texas, when the fight between the White Hope and the Big Smoke [Jack Johnson, then the World Heavyweight Champion] had been dated for Juarez. Willard at that time was working out every day before a large crowd, in preparation for the expected Juarez battle. Farmer was the lightest of the men who boxed with the big Kansan, men like Monohan and O'Rourke, who weigh over two hundred pounds, forming the rest of the practice squad....

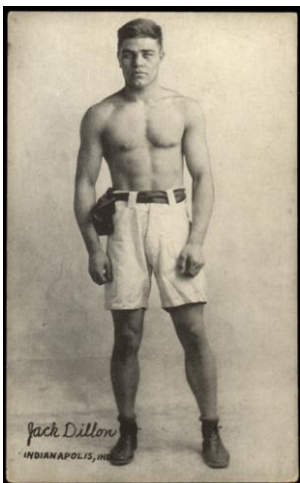
(Later, Farmer (178 lbs.) and Willard (265 lbs.) would engage in an exhibition bout Dec. 27, 1922, in Yakima—when ex-champion Willard was traveling through the area with Gene Doyle and “Valentino” Ray Archer on an exhibition tour.)

Farmer made his only trip to the American East Coast in 1915, fighting twelve times with mixed success, including one bout in New York. (He had been unable to get bouts in the Tacoma area at the time because he was “in bad” with the “ring” that was running practically everything in the area, per another newspaper article from an unidentified source. Earlier, according to the Feb. 11, 1915 *Tacoma Daily News*, he had been in the Los Angeles area seeking fights with his then-manager, Col. Andy Mulligan.) The highlight of the trip for Farmer was a ten-round bout with Jimmy Clabby in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, on July 12. The Oshkosh *Northwestern* reported that Farmer “had a shade the best of it” and noted that he “drew the only blood when he opened a cut over Clabby's left eye in the fourth round, and the only knockdown when he sent Clabby to the carpet in the third.”

During this trip, Farmer also met heavyweight Fred Fulton at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on June 4. Mike Collins was the promoter in Eau Claire and he was also manager of Fulton. Farmer told Collins that he would take the bout if it were limited to six rounds because he was not in shape to go a full ten against a fighter of Fulton's size. According to Farmer, Collins agreed to this stipulation and the match was made. When Farmer arrived in Eau Claire, he found Collins had double-crossed him and made the match for ten rounds. At the end of the sixth round, Farmer refused to fight any longer and Fulton was declared the winner by technical knockout.

Farmer's last fight on the trip was against light heavyweight title claimant Jack Dillon, known as “the Giant Killer,” who kayoed the Washingtonian in four rounds. The Kapowsin Logger would have his revenge two years later when he won a six-round decision over the Hoosier Bearcat at Tacoma, when the future Hall of Famer Dillon was then the ex-champion. Dillon had planned to use a Tacoma match with Farmer to launch a lucrative tour of the West Coast. But his campaign was de-railed by Farmer's quick

fists. Dillon lost the six-round decision and retreated from his only Pacific Northwest visit, never to return to the West Coast again, complaining that the four and six-round game was not for him. Nationally-known fighters who were used to fighting ten, fifteen, and twenty-round battles were reluctant to risk their hard-won reputations in the short four and six-round bouts allowed in the West Coast states. Often a local fighter who was used to the shorter distance could “steal” a win in a shorter bout before his more-famous eastern opponent could get warmed up. Sometimes “special arrangements” were made between managers to protect their fighters from such an outcome. For example, after Farmer drew with Al Sommers on January 18, 1916 at the Rose City Athletic Club in Portland, Oregon, it was discovered that both boxers and their managers had previously agreed to box a draw, rehearsed what they would do during the bout, and “to guarantee against double-crossing the managers drafted an agreement and posted \$50 apiece.”³⁴ Upon learning this, the club's manager,



Fred T. Merrill, banned all concerned forever from his venue. The boxing public, however, understood the practice better than did the club's manager, and Farmer continued as a popular attraction in the Portland area for many years to come.

A May 27, 1919 *Call and Post* San Francisco newspaper clipping pasted by Farmer in his surviving scrapbook reported that he had fought in the Bay Area circa 1916 (although no documented bouts have been located so far):

Farmer is a stranger to San Franciscans except by reputation. However, there are a few who have seen him before in a local ring. About three years ago Farmer came to us as a "Masked Marvel." He was under the management of a chap [Sam Howard] who called himself "Gold Tooth Sam." "Gold Tooth" was a very mysterious chap. He kept his "Marvel" hidden away until the night he was to give a tryout for the newspapermen. The "Marvel," who later it was discovered was Farmer, went on with a fellow named George Pappas, a tough Greek with little knowledge of boxing. Farmer did well until the mask he was wearing slipped down over his eyes so he could not see. Pappas took advantage of the situation and almost punched the Marvel's head off before he could get his mask adjusted. Tonight Farmer will wear no mask. Therefore we'll see him at his best.

Around late 1916 Farmer married Miss Julia (or Jewell) Albertine of Orting, WA, in the office of Justice John W. Linck. (Two photographs of Farmer and his wife doing roadwork and sparring together in a gym can be found in a Sunday, March 25, 1917 Tacoma newspaper. A copy is in his scrapbook, as is a big photo of Mrs. Farmer that was published in the Nov. 24 *Tacoma Times*.) She became his manager shortly after they were married. (The Farmers had a daughter, who was born March 28, 1918.)



On April 12, 1917, at the Tacoma Eagles Lodge, Farmer was set to fight Sgt. Al Ross. As a special promotion, Charlie Lewis, of the local Burnside Hat Store, offered a new cap to each winner. Not to be outdone, his competitor, Art McGinley, offered a new one to each loser. All fourteen boxers on the card received new hats as well as their purses.

By November 1917, Farmer was still working in a logging camp near Kapowsin for \$5.00 a day, although the August 19 *Tacoma Tribune* reported that he been called out in the military draft. He won a six-round decision April 11, 1918, over Mick King—the former Australian claimant for the world middleweight title—to annex the Pacific Coast Heavyweight Championship at Eagles Hall. According to the *Tacoma News Tribune* accounts: "[W]hen the decision was given to Farmer, the crowd acted as no other ever did at a Tacoma fight. Bankers, loggers, fishermen and men from every walk of life leaped into the ring."

After this bout, and then serving a short stint in the Navy near the end of World War I, Farmer headed to Canada, but was back by May 1919 when he could not find many opponents there either.³⁵ He had only one bout there, meeting Al Ross again on April 11, in Calgary, Alberta.

BOXING
Under the Auspices of the Boxing Commission

FRIDAY, APRIL 11
8:30 p.m., at the
AL AZHAR TEMPLE

Triple Feature Program

AL ROSS vs. FRANK FARMER
(OF CALGARY) (OF TACOMA)
TEN ROUNDS
FOR MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP

FRANK LANDERS vs. TOUGHIE HARDIE
(CALGARY) (EDMONTON)
Eight Rounds

GEORGIE ROSS vs. SAMMIE GLEW
(American Navy Champion) (3rd Div. C.E.F. Champion)
Eight Rounds

ITALIO vs. WEBBER
(CALGARY) (CALGARY)
Four Rounds

PRICES — \$3.00, \$2.00, \$1.00
Seat Sale opens Wednesday, April 9, in Boxing Commission Office (Above Kolb's Restaurant)

Farmer later was matched for an October 13, 1920 bout at the Civic Arena in Seattle with the soon-to-become legendary African-American fighter Sam Langford. The match was looked upon with special interest because it was Langford's debut appearance in the Pacific Northwest. (It became Langford's *only* bout in the area.)

Langford, although long past his prime, was considered one of the greatest fighters to have ever laced on a pair of gloves. Former heavyweight champ Jack Johnson had refused to defend his championship against Langford because Langford had given him his hardest fight in 1905, just two years before Johnson had won the title. Even reigning heavyweight champ Jack Dempsey had admitted that, as a young fighter coming up, he had been afraid of Langford and had refused several offers to fight him.

And later, in 1943, legendary Pacific Northwest promoter Joe Waterman declared that Langford was the greatest fighter he had ever seen in his 44 years of “watching ringdom’s best.”³⁶ Intimidated by Langford’s reputation, Farmer lost the four-round decision.

Farmer was nervous and awed by old Sam and failed to put up his usual bout, making the poorest showing he has ever made in the Northwest. Farmer clinched so much that the fans booed, but he was in there to stick the four rounds and he did. He refused to use his right hand, which he injured some months back, on the head of Langford, about the only spot, it seems, that Langford could be hit the way he was fighting Wednesday night.³⁷

As a result of this lousy performance, Farmer was not invited to fight again in Seattle for almost two years.

Farmer, however, remained Tacoma’s top heavyweight drawing card. On January 12, 1922, Shanklin again called on Farmer—this time to headline the inaugural boxing card at the newly-built Eagles Lodge against nationally-ranked heavyweight contender Jack McAuliffe of Detroit. For the first time Farmer failed to post a win at the Eagles, as McAuliffe recorded his eleventh KO win in eleven straight bouts. According to Elliott Metcalf, the fight with McAuliffe ended Farmer’s career as a national top-liner and he “hit the toboggan, slid(ing) down the chute to near-oblivion.” Farmer continued to toil in the boxing vineyards for another eight years, winning more fights than he lost, but he never again was a factor against nationally-recognized competition.

From 1918 to 1922, Farmer reportedly was the Pacific Coast Light Heavyweight Champion. The June 7, 1920 *Tacoma News Tribune* declared him to be the most popular boxer in the Pacific Northwest. By that time, he was raising sheep near the town of Orting, Washington. Over the next few years, he held the Light Heavyweight Championship of Canada, the Pacific Northwest Heavyweight Championship, the Pacific Coast Light Heavyweight crown, and the Pacific Coast Heavyweight title.

By the summer of 1928, Frank Farmer had become somewhat “shop-worn,” having had only a handful of bouts the previous two years. This was when he met Spark Plug Boyd for the first time—in a ring in Olympia, WA. It resulted in an inconclusive six-round draw. A little over a year later, after Farmer had had three other bouts, and Boyd a baker’s dozen of his own, the two met again, this time in Drumheller, Alberta, when the Kapowsin logger got the unanimous ten-round decision over his Aberdeen rival. (By this time however, Farmer had successfully defended his Western Canadian Light Heavyweight Title with his previous bout, on December 31, 1929, when he defeated Otto Berg in Drumheller, Alberta. Farmer apparently had won the title when he knocked out Philip Befus on Sept. 21 at Stettler, Alberta.)

Farmer had earned more than \$100,000 in the ring by 1930—a goodly sum for that era.³⁸ Yet, by then, he had lost his fortune, home and family.

On March 24, 1930, 40-year-old Frank Farmer was set to fight Spark Plug Boyd once again—this time in a small-time show being promoted by long-timer Eddie Marino, at the Garden Athletic Club in Tacoma, and for a purse of probably no more than a paltry \$25. Farmer pleaded with his sportswriter friends (including Elliot Metcalf) to not queer this bout. He was broke, flat broke, and needed the money. Yet, against their advice, he headed off to fight his younger opponent.

“That Farmer has been able to continue these long years is proof of his unusual physical construction. He certainly isn’t the physical wreck of thousands of fighters with less than half his time in the ring.”³⁹

Farmer was ahead on points by the fifth of their sixth two-minute-round bout, when Boyd rushed in and placed to light rights to the stomach and a lighter left to the face.



The veteran then seemed to slightly shudder and fall forward into a clinch. The crowd thought it was merely a move of strategy, one which Farmer had employed to his advantage for years. The men in embrace backed into the west ropes and then worked over to the east ropes.

Farmer released Boyd as “Spark Plug” tugged to free himself. Came that peculiar smile—and Boyd stepped back. The “Old Bald Eagle’s” arms were at his side, hanging loosely. That indicative smile appeared. Boyd did not attack. He, too, seemed to sense something strange in that almost weird smile.

And then the “Old Bald Eagle” crashed to the soil of the hunting grounds where he had so many times conquered usurpers—where so many times he had seen rivals grovel in the slag of the battle field, victims of his cunning and skill.

Simultaneously with Farmer’s collapse Referee Eddie Ashing leaped to position over him to begin the orthodox count, but that was but a heedless gesture. A greater Time Keeper had tolled the end of the Northwest ring’s most picturesque figure.⁴⁰

The Associated Press stated: “Toe to toe with his opponent, the smell of resin and sweat in his nostrils, the hoots and cheers of fans in his ears, and with gloves swinging, Frank Farmer died in the midst of the life he knew for a score of years.” (Farmer once said: “I don’t know of any better way for a guy to bump off than with his working ‘boots’ on.”⁴¹)

Boyd was arrested immediately after the bout and jailed. The following day, after a very short hearing, Coroner U. S. Lodge’s inquest found that Farmer’s death was caused by a “heart block” (the muscles of Farmer’s abdomen had reacted in such a way that they formed a wall of rock, blocking all circulation), rather than by his opponent’s blows, thus Boyd was exonerated of any blame and released from custody. (Just as efforts to legalize prize-fighting in Washington state were once again underway—after the Feb. 5, 1929, Seattle ring-death of Eddie Cartwright—Farmer’s death made them all moot once more.)

Mellinger’s Funeral Home provided the services. Farmer left behind a divorced wife and daughter. He also left behind brothers Charles, R. M., and Orin (of Tacoma), Perry (Fife), Chester (Copalis), and Delar (Buckley); sisters Mrs. E. M. Blair (Tacoma), Mrs. E. A. Beachwood, and Mrs. Mabel Landis (Buckley); and nephew/fellow boxer Dewey (Kid) Beachey.⁴² Farmer was interred in a grove at Woodland Cemetery, Sumner. Tacoma Promoter George Shanklin read the final services, and closed with: “Goodbye, old friend; goodbye!”⁴³ Although research by BoxRec.com editors credits Farmer with 129 professional fights, Elliott Metcalf estimated the number at closer to four hundred.

Spark Plug Boyd wasn’t the same man afterward. He went directly from main events, to semi-windups, to preliminary bouts in the Seattle suburb of White Center—where many of the Boeing Airplane Company’s workers resided, and where former heavyweight contender Floyd Johnson was putting on weekly semi-amateur cards, often sending contingents of boxers across Elliott Bay to appear on cards in



the Navy port town of Bremerton—eventually having a series of draws and losses, and only a handful of wins, in some two dozen more fights. Boyd finished out his professional boxing career with various bouts in Bremerton, Nevada, San Francisco, and even one in Iowa, before having his last-known documented fight—losing to Bob Fraser August 2, 1932 in Seattle. By career end, Boyd had amassed some 119 documented bouts. In time, he married and divorced, and also served in the United States Army during World War II.

Once toward the last of it we saw him at a carnival—taking on all comers. He was standing on a platform in a cool rain—a well-worn suit coat draped over his shoulders. “These rubes don’t know no boxing but they hit like they had baseball bats,” he told us lately.

Then he hit the Skidroad.

Sometimes—and perhaps because he had a measure of pride—he’d tell us he began to slip because of and after the Farmer thing. At other times he was more honest.

“I was wore out,” he said. “I didn’t have it. When you’re through you’re through.”⁴⁴

On June 12, 1961, Woodward Tending was discovered dead in a Seattle hotel room at 219-1st Avenue. His death certificate states that he had died of confluent broncho pneumonia, due to chronic alcoholism, with bilateral pulmonary tuberculosis as a contributing condition. His cremated ashes were interred in the Willamette National Cemetery (Plot B 987) in Portland, Oregon—due to his military service. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* published a retrospective of his life on June 24. That was essentially about the last time most people ever heard of or about him.

And, with his death, another formally popular, yet local, prize-fighter began *his* fade into oblivion, soon to be forgotten. “I’m Spark Plug Boyd. Spark Plug Boyd, the fighter. Ever heard of me?”

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¹ June 24, 1961 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

² *Id.*

³ “The Greening of Grays Harbor,” *Seattle Business Monthly* (August 2008), pp. 36-39.

⁴ [Aberdeen Museum Timeline](http://www.aberdeen-museum.org/1917.htm) (<http://www.aberdeen-museum.org/1917.htm>)

⁵ “Boxing Sport is Booming in Many Northwest Cities” April 10, 1908 *Tacoma Daily News*

⁶ [Aberdeen Museum Timeline](#) (*supra*)

⁷ January 31, 1924 *Hoquiam American*

⁸ Sept. 1, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

⁹ January 25, 1923 *Hoquiam American*

¹⁰ June 24, 1961 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

¹¹ Oct. 20, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

¹² Sept. 1, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

¹³ Sept. 8, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

¹⁴ Sept. 8, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

¹⁵ Sept. 20, 1923 *Hoquiam American*

¹⁶ Sept. 27, 1923 *Hoquiam American*

¹⁷ Oct. 18, 1923 *Hoquiam American*

¹⁸ Oct. 20, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

¹⁹ Sept. 1, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

²⁰ Oct. 20, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

²¹ Dec. 26, 1922 *Tacoma News Tribune*

²² Oct. 27, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

²³ Nov. 3, 1923 *Grays Harbor Post*

²⁴ Jan. 26, 1923 *Everett Daily Herald*

²⁵ Dec. 6, 1923 *Hoquiam American*

²⁶ Oct. 25, 1917 *Seattle Daily Times*

²⁷ Oct. 26, 1920 *Tacoma News Tribune*

²⁸ May 29, 1924 *Hoquiam American*

²⁹ June 4, 1924 *Hoquiam American*

³⁰ May 16, 1924 *Tacoma News Tribune*

³¹ May 22, 1924 *Hoquiam American*

³² March 8, 1913 *Tacoma Daily News*

³³ From an unidentified 1913 Tacoma newspaper article found in Farmer's scrapbook.

³⁴ *Everett Daily Herald* (Exact date misplaced)

³⁵ May 12, 1919 *Tacoma News Tribune*

³⁶ *The Knockout* (March 6, 1943), p. 2, as reprinted in *IBRO Journal* No. 95, p. 74.

³⁷ Oct. 14, 1920 *Tacoma News Tribune*

³⁸ March 25, 1930 *Tacoma News Tribune*

³⁹ March 24, 1930 *Tacoma News Tribune*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² July 9, 1929 *Tacoma News Tribune* confirms that Farmer was Dewey's uncle.

⁴³ March 28, 1930 *Tacoma Times*

⁴⁴ June 24, 1961 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

This article is the debut entry of a series of stories about boxing in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States—under the banner of “Pugilistic Tales of the Pacific Northwest”—to be published intermittently in future editions of the *IBRO Journal*.

It was inspired by Robert Carson's “The Bald Eagle's Last Flight,” which appeared in the February 1978 issue of *Boxing Beat*.

Some material herein was previously written by the author for the BoxRec.com boxing encyclopaedia and as “bout comments” to its fight record database.

I thank fellow IBRO Member John Ochs for his generous permission to use some of his original text regarding Frank Farmer's career, and allowing me to borrow Farmer's surviving scrapbook that he possesses.

I invite other IBRO Members who have information about Pacific Northwest boxing to contribute to this series. Contact me at ric@boxrec.com