

THE SHELBY AFTERMATH

Shelby, Montana was a small, unheard of cowtown of around 500 souls in 1923 and was regarded as one of the poorest towns west of the Mississippi. In 1922 they struck oil near Shelby in a place called Sunburst Field, and the town's big wigs wanted to promote their town in hopes of getting more people and money to move and invest there. There wasn't much in Shelby at the time, a few buildings, some dirt farmers, cowboys, and sheep herders. Local Indians were also in and around Shelby. Travelers and salesmen always made sure the town of Shelby wasn't one of their stops.

Certain townspeople had hopes of making a financial killing and make Shelby well known by staging a heavyweight championship boxing match between titleholder Jack Dempsey, and challenger Tommy Gibbons of St. Paul, to take place on July 4, 1923.

Mike Collins and Mose Zimmerman were brought to Shelby from St. Paul by the backers to put the fight together. They met with Dempsey's manager, Jack Kearns where they guaranteed him \$300,000 plus training expenses to meet Gibbons in Shelby. Kearns tried to talk them out of it but he couldn't. Kearns accepted and the first of three payments of \$100,000 was made. Pressed to come up with the cash the second payment of \$100,000 was made late.

The townspeople couldn't come up with the final \$100,000 and Kearns said he was calling the fight off. When the word got around many who had planned the trek to Shelby cancelled their trip. Special trains that had been scheduled were also cancelled. In a meeting with all concerned Kearns finally agreed to take the offer of the promoters to take what was in the till, \$84,000, as the final payment. It was said that a few shots were fired during the heated meeting.

So the fight was back on, but the damage as far as attendance was already done. On Kearns' insistence, the entire promotion had been turned over to Kearns and a friend of his, Dan McKetrick. Around 7,000 fans paid their way into the outdoor arena along with several hundred gate crashers. Local Indians dotted the hillsides around the arena to view the action. There was plenty of unhappy, gun-toting townspeople who had invested their money in attendance but everyone kept their pistols holstered during the course of action. Kearns however, could feel the hostility generated toward him, McKetrick, and Dempsey, and he wanted to get out of town with the money as soon as he could after the fight.

Gibbons knew he was fighting for nothing, but it was a chance at the big title, and he wasn't going to pass it up. Through fifteen rounds Dempsey tried to catch up with the elusive, slick boxing Gibbons, but Jack was never able to land anything resembling a kyo punch, and round after round passed. Kearns had fully expected his tiger to put away the over thirty St. Paulite, and Kearns was plenty worried as the rounds passed.

When the fifteenth and final session ended Kearns was in the ring in a hurry. Dempsey received the decision and had retained his crown. Gibbons had become the first man to last the distance with the dynamite punching Dempsey. Gibbons would, in later life, get a lot of mileage out of the fact he had lasted fifteen rounds with Dempsey.

Kearns immediately got Dempsey and McKetrick, and the rest of their entourage together, and caught the first train out of town to Salt Lake City. There had been several threats and Kearns, who was carrying the bag of money, was scared. Kearns decided that he and McKetrick, along with all that cash, would split from Dempsey and the others, and go to Great Falls, Montana to throw off anyone who might decide to follow.

In Great Falls, Kearns and McKetrick couldn't find a room for the night anywhere. The two went to see the local sheriff, a man named Benjamin. A deal was made with the lawman who put Kearns and McKetrick in a cellar beneath a barber shop where they slept that night. The sheriff and his deputies, who had been paid a substantial amount by Kearns, stood guard around the barber shop until Kearns and McKetrick could arrange a way to get out of town.

The following morning Dan McKetrick went to the office of the superintendent of the Great Northern Railroad to find out if an arrangement could be made for a special railroad car to take them to Salt Lake City so they could sell an interest in a mine they owned. McKetrick didn't haggle much when the superintendent said it could be done for \$500. They shook hands on the deal and McKetrick headed back to the cellar to give Kearns the news.

About an hour later the rail car was ready and the sheriff escorted Kearns and McKetrick to the railroad yards, and soon the train chugged out of Great Falls. It wasn't a long trip and before long they were in Salt Lake City. Kearns and McKetrick met the men they came to see, and sold out their interest in the mine.

With their business completed and a satchel full of money, Kearns and McKetrick caught a train for New York leaving the west behind them.

Back in poor Shelby, Montana the town lay busted and broke as the hoped-for boom from the title fight had fallen flat. Three banks had closed their doors, and the wealthy backers of the boxing match had lost most of their money. It would be many years later before Shelby would recover.

Mike Collins and Mose Zimmerman returned to St. Paul without getting much for their labors. The original promoters of the Shelby fiasco, Mayor Jim Johnson, Sam Sampson, James Speer, Lou McCutcheon, and Lou Molumby, were still in Shelby where they had to live down the idea that went wrong. The only thing they had left was a forty two percent interest in the film rights of the fight. The aftermath of the Shelby fight left a lot of broke, but wiser men in Montana, and Jack Kearns with the town's money in New York.