

CALL IT OFF

By George D. Blair

It would seem strange that a world title fight would get boxing outlawed, but it did happen back in 1891 in St. Paul, Minnesota. Early in the year Bob Fitzsimmons, the world middleweight champion, was in Minneapolis to box a four rounder against "The Black Pearl" (Harris Martin). John Barnes and Pat Connelly, St. Paul promoters, wanted to put a title fight on in St. Paul and decided they would talk to Fitzsimmons and his handlers about defending his crown for them.

After much conversation Fitzsimmons agreed to terms. Barnes and Connelly secured Australian Jem Hall as the opponent for the title clash. It was to be a fight to the finish with five ounce gloves in a St. Paul baseball park.

When the match was announced it drew immediate nationwide interest. Prior to coming to the United States from his homeland of Australia, Fitzsimmons lost only one fight, that to the same Jem Hall by a fourth round knockout. Hall had come to America for the express purpose of getting a title match with Fitzsimmons, and now it was set to happen. A large crowd was expected and interest was high.

Fitzsimmons and Hall signed the articles of agreement and preparations were set in motion. Ruby Robert sent up his training camp in White Bear Lake, about fifteen miles north of St. Paul. Hall chose a more distant site, Ashland, Wisconsin, for his training site. Both boxers went to work for the June championship clash.

Enter politics. The fight was drawing a lot of publicity and some reform groups decided they didn't want this kind of publicity for their city so they went to Minnesota Governor William R. Merriam. They put a lot of pressure on Merriam, and with re-election coming up the Governor bowed and issued an order to Barnes and Connelly to call off the title fight. When the promoters refused to do so Merriam became enraged. The reform groups applied more pressure threatening to have Merriam impeached if he didn't stop the fight.

Merriam pushed the state legislature for an anti-boxing law, but there was no way he could get it passed in time to stop the Fitzsimmons-Hall fight. Caught in the middle, Merriam again ordered the promoters to cancel the match. Lawyers for Connelly and

Barnes stated that if Merriam didn't stop they would go to court to keep him from interfering any further, and that Minnesota didn't have any laws against boxing. The Governor said that the state didn't have any laws that permitted the sport either.

Both fighters were training hard. Fans who traveled to Ashland to see Hall returned to St. Paul with the news that Hall really looked great and this created more interest and publicity, and infuriated the reform groups.

As the day of the fight drew closer Merriam again ordered the promoters to call off the fight and again they flatly refused. Tempers were growing shorter on both sides and things were very touchy. Fitzsimmons and Hall broke up their training camps and headed into town for the final touches of their training.

On the morning of the fight Merriam issued an order to the promoters to call it off, and they said no. Fight fans had arrived from all over the country and the fans started heading for the ball park. At noon the Governor called out the state militia and they surrounded the ball park and allowed no one to enter. At this point Barnes and Connelly had no choice but to call off the fight. Fitzsimmons and Hall packed their bags and left St. Paul.

Under heavy pressure, the state legislature passed an anti-boxing law making the sport illegal in Minnesota. Of course this didn't stop the boxers as shows were held in secret, especially in Hibbing in northern Minnesota. Boxing remained an illegal activity with the penalty for violating the law being five years in prison or a one thousand dollar fine, or both. Boxing remained illegal until the law was repealed in 1915.

It's certainly strange that a world title fight could cause a sport to be banned for 23 years.