

BOXING'S FIRST

The manly art of prizefighting has been around since the beginning of recorded time, but only in the last decade has the sport been promoted into a billion-dollar industry. The evolution of boxing from a working class pastime of bare-knuckle brawling to a pay-per-view mega attraction can be traced back to two legendary lawmen from the Old West: Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson.

The seed that launched the career of the greatest showman boxing promoter in American history was planted during Wyatt's years in Alaska.

Wyatt "Referee" Earp

Wyatt arrived in Nome in the summer of 1899. By then, Wyatt had gained some fame in the boxing world—not all good.

A skilled boxer, Wyatt, in his early 20s, began officiating boxing matches across Wyoming Territory for rail crews and buffalo hunters. In 1896, he helped his pal Judge Roy Bean promote a bout between heavyweight champion Bob Fitzsimmons and Peter Maher.

With boxing outlawed in Texas, the bout was fought in a makeshift ring on Mexican soil, in the town of Coahuila, with spectators viewing the fight from a hillside overlooking the Rio Grande.

A former lawman in Dodge City, Kansas, Masterson secured the ticket handling and fight purse. He also covered the sport in his Denver, Colorado, newspaper column for *George's Weekly* and promoted prizefights at his Olympic Avenue Club.

Masterson's history in the boxing arena included serving as the timekeeper at the first World Heavyweight Championship, under the Queensberry Rules. In the 1882 battle, "Gentleman Jim" Corbett defeated "Boston Strong Boy" John L. Sullivan by knockout in the 26th round.

In the 1896 bout in Mexico, Fitzsimmons scored a knockout win in 95 seconds. Wyatt and Masterson moved on along the boxing circuit.

Later that year, a scandal erupted.

In a San Francisco, California, heavyweight contest, Fitzsimmons landed a three-punch combination on "Sailor Tom" Sharkey, with the last punch hitting below the belt. Wyatt ruled the final blow a foul and awarded the fight—and its \$10,000 purse—to Sharkey.

A friend of Sharkey's manager Danny Lynch, Wyatt was accused of fixing the fight, a claim he denied. He dissuaded the embittered Fitzsimmons and the angry crowd from seeking revenge by exiting Mechanic's Pavilion with his trusty Colt .45 in his hand.

The Dawson Seed

Hoping to find some of the gold glittering on the shores of Nome, Alaska, Wyatt arrived there with his wife, Josie. He had been invited by a friend, George Lewis "Tex" Rickard.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1870 and reared in north Texas, where he worked as a city marshal in Henrietta, Rickard had rushed to Alaska during the gold strike of 1895. He staked claims for two, hapless years until the Klondike discovery of 1897 pulled him into the greatest stampede in American history.

A move to Dawson marked the beginning of Rickard's "golden touch." Within a year, his claims had paid close to \$60,000. He parlayed his

prospecting success into purchasing a thriving saloon, the Northern. Yet his eagerness to multiply his fortunes got the best of Rickard. He gambled away his business in Dawson's "emporiums of chance."

When Rickard struck pay dirt yet again, he poured his earnings into a newer Northern, the largest saloon in Nome.

Wyatt and Josie had previously tried their luck in the Yukon in 1897. They made it as far as Juneau, Alaska, before turning back, reportedly because Josie was pregnant (she later miscarried).

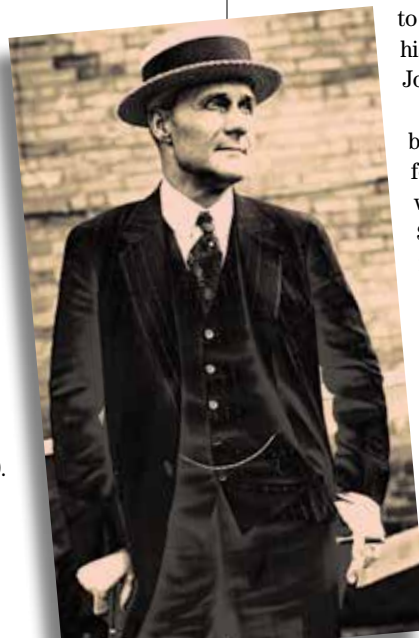
The next year, they made it to Wrangell, where bad weather forced them to hold up until the spring thaw. By the time they moved on to Rampart, the Klondike Rush was all but over.

After arriving in Nome in 1899, Wyatt introduced Rickard to the lucrative enterprise of live boxing shows, thus launching the career of one of America's greatest sports promoters and ballyhoo artists.

Like his pal, Wyatt gambled on the saloon business, building the Dexter Saloon with C.E. Hoxsie, which opened in September. Wyatt's fame as a gunslinger drew business. After two years, he sold

his interest in the Dexter to Hoxsie and transferred his mining claims to Josie's brother, Nathan.

Wyatt and Josie boarded the *S.S. Roanoke* for Seattle, Washington, with \$80,000 (more than \$2 million today). They moved to Tonopah, Nevada, where Wyatt ran a saloon and worked as a deputy U.S. marshal.



CHAMPION

Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson planted the seed that launched the great "Tex" Rickard.



Goldfield's World Title Fight

Rickard followed the Earps a few years later, landing south, in Goldfield, when the Silver State's boomtown was in full swing. With the 1902 strike, the mining camp's population soared from a few scrub prospectors to 20,000 souls, making it Nevada's largest town. Rickard opened the last and largest of his Northern saloons.

Goldfield is also where Wyatt's brother, Virgil, lived out his last days. After arriving in 1904, he was sworn in

as deputy sheriff of Esmeralda County. With his left arm maimed and rendered useless by the O.K. Corral shoot-out in Tombstone, Arizona Territory, Virgil took a job as a security officer at the National Club. Struck by pneumonia, he died on October 19, 1905.

Rickard found a distraction for Wyatt as he grieved his older brother's death. Rickard announced on the news wire that Goldfield wanted to host a world title fight. The first boxer to accept Rickard's challenge was the number-one contender

Wyatt Earp earned the equivalent of millions after being lured to Nome, Alaska, by George Lewis "Tex" Rickard (opposite page). He returned the favor by introducing Rickard to the lucrative trade of live boxing promotion. When Wyatt left to settle in Tonopah, Nevada, he built a saloon named after Rickard's popular Northern saloon in Nome. Wyatt's Northern (shown above, in 1902) was run by Al Martin, while Wyatt and wife Josie prospected. Some Earp experts speculate the woman on the horse at left is Josie.

— COURTESY JEFF MOREY —

The evolution of boxing can be traced back to legendary lawmen Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson.

for the lightweight crown, Oscar “Battling” Nelson.

Rickard needed to raise \$30,000, so he could sign Joe Gans, the country’s first black lightweight champion. With the help of con artist and criminal stock trader George Graham Rice, Rickard secured the funds within days.

Rickard stacked the purse’s \$10 and \$20 gold pieces in the window of the local bank. A staggering sum at the time, the trick put Goldfield in headlines nationwide.

Held on September 3, 1906, the mixed-race match-up became the longest bout of the century. Gans outfought the “Durable Dane,” winning on a foul in the 42nd round. The sold-out, 20,000-seat event paid \$69,715 (\$1.92 million today).

Rickard’s next “main event” was Jack Johnson versus James J. Jeffries in Reno. Billed as the “Fight of the Century,” this July 4, 1910, heavyweight contest paid out an unheard of sum of \$120,000 (\$3.13 million today) to Johnson so he would defend his title against the undefeated Jeffries. Lured out of his six-year retirement with a guaranteed payout for \$60,000 (\$1.56 million today), Jeffries got knocked out in round 15.

When Johnson was defeated by Jess Willard in Havana, Cuba, on April 5, 1915, Masterson reported on the fight for the *New York Morning Telegraph*.

Willard wore the crown until 1919, when he was crushed in three rounds by “Manassa Mauler” Jack Dempsey. The Rickard-promoted event launched the Roaring Twenties and the Golden Age of boxing in America.

Boxing for the Bluebloods

When New York legalized boxing in 1920, Rickard moved his promotional operations to Manhattan. By then, Rickard and Masterson were respected members of New York’s high society and friends of the Astors, Rockefellers and Roosevelts. They strolled the sidewalks of New York with their trademark Fedoras and Stetson hats and gold-handled walking sticks.

Rickard’s first “million-dollar gate” took place on July 2, 1921—the bout between Dempsey and Georges Carpentier. More than 90,000 hysterical fans paid \$1,789,238 to watch Dempsey demolish the Frenchman in four rounds. The fight was the first national radio broadcast of a sporting event.

Dempsey’s was also Masterson’s last heavyweight championship fight. He died, on October 25, of a heart attack, after writing a column for the *New York Morning Telegraph*. Roughly 500 people attended Masterson’s funeral; Rickard served as a pallbearer.

The sport of boxing kept punching on. Rickard assembled financial backers he called the “600 millionaires” and constructed a third edition of New York’s Madison Square Garden. The “house that Tex built” opened on 8th Avenue in December 1925. The modern setting made it fashionable for ladies and bluebloods to attend boxing matches.

The boxing impresario also expanded his sports empire; he bought a NHL hockey team for the 1926–27 season. Tex’s Rangers, later the New York Rangers, won the division title in their debut season and the Stanley Cup in their second year.

Throughout the 1920s, Rickard’s adept manipulation of the press continued to produce million-dollar gates at the box office. The Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney championship rematch at Chicago’s Soldier’s Field generated a record \$2,658,660.

Boxing’s First Champion

Recognizing the profit potential in a year-round resort community like Miami Beach, Rickard went to Florida on January 1, 1929, to evaluate opportunities. After a bout of appendicitis, he died one week later, at age 59.

Before hearing the news of his pal’s death, Wyatt got out of his sick bed to send Rickard a get-well telegram, caught a chill and relapsed into chronic cystitis.



Jack Johnson (top) took out undefeated champion James L. Jeffries (above) at the July 4, 1910, bout in Reno, Nevada, and held onto his world heavyweight championship title until 1915.

— COURTESY F. DANIEL SOMRACK —

The frontier lawman died one week later, on January 13, at age 80.

Rickard’s body was brought to New York’s Madison Square Garden to lie in state in a \$15,000 bronze casket. Hundreds of mourners said their goodbyes to the man who had risen from a humble Texas lawman into an empire builder. One of the last links to the great American heroes of the Old West, the trailblazing visionary had made boxing the mega sport it is today.

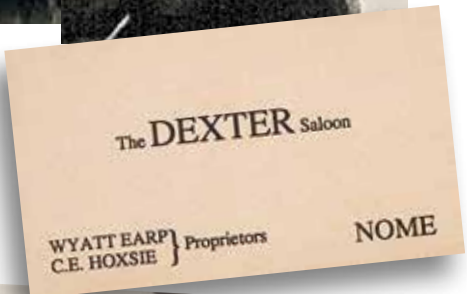


F. Daniel Somrack is a filmmaker and boxing historian who produced the sports documentary, *Champions Forever*, featuring Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier and George Foreman. He is also the author of *Boxing in San Francisco*. Head to BoxingScribe.com to read his blogs.



Wyatt Earp is shown in Nome, Alaska (inset), where he partnered with C.E. Hoxsie in the Dexter Saloon (see business card) shown in this street scene. Opened in September 1899, the Dexter offered drinking and gambling on the first floor and a brothel upstairs.

- SALOON PHOTO COURTESY CARRIE M. MCCLAIN MUSEUM COLLECTION, NOME, ALASKA; WYATT EARP PHOTO COURTESY KANSAS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 209261; BUSINESS CARD TRUE WEST ARCHIVES -



On Labor Day 1906 in Goldfield, Nevada, "Tex" Rickard hosted the longest bout of the century that saw black lightweight champion Joe Gans (right) outfight Oscar "Battling" Nelson (far right).

- COURTESY CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY DIGITAL COMMONS -

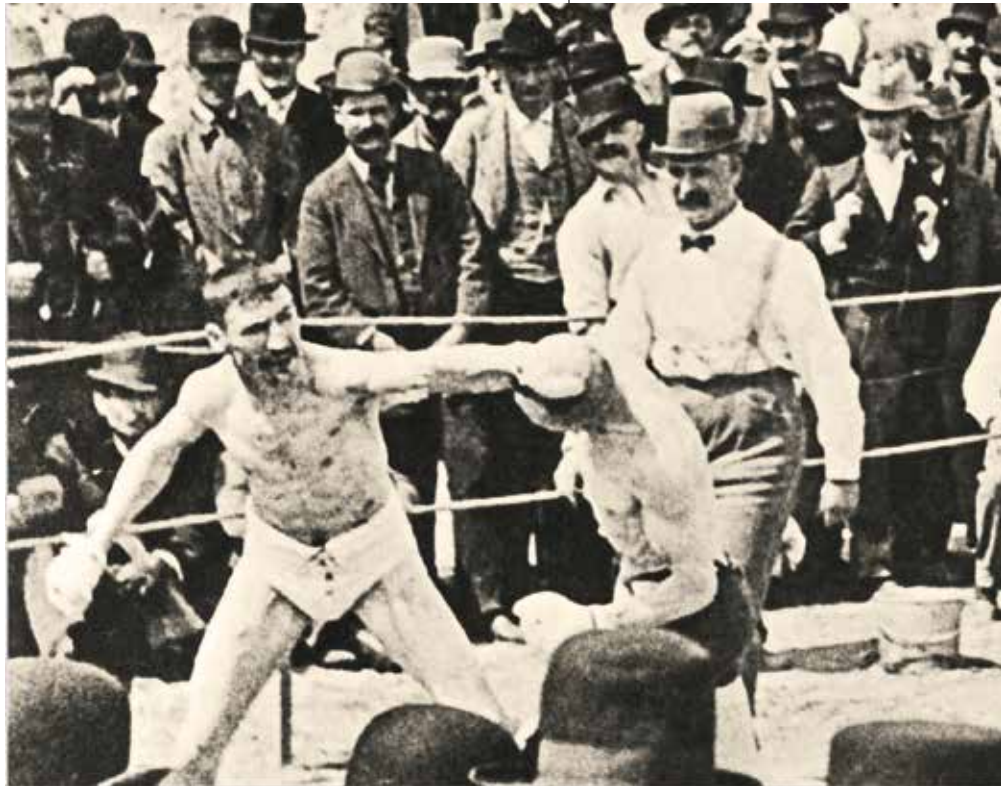
New “Old” Photo of 1896 Fight

The other “view” of the Maher-Fitzsimmons match.

Over 65 years of publication, *True West* has developed a loyal following of readers who send us historical Old West photographs to preserve in our archives. Among these is a photograph labeled as showing the makeshift Peter Maher-Bob Fitzsimmons arena on a sandbar along Rio Grande, near Langtry, Texas (bottom photo, opposite page).

During the past decade, some of the top museums nationwide have shared their public domain images, fostering scholarship that used to be relegated only to those willing to search through physical archives to find material that is sometimes labeled incorrectly or without sufficient information to locate it otherwise. The J. Paul Getty Museum is among those top repositories.

As the editor of this magazine, I also try to locate historical images for our articles. Because F. Daniel Somrack’s feature focused on boxing, I delved into a realm I don’t often explore, seeking matches that fit the frontier era. With Bat Masterson and Judge Roy Bean tied to the Maher-Fitzsimmons match, I tried my luck there. My search ultimately led me to “Fight Between Bob Fitzsimmons and Peter Maher, Coahuila de Zaragoza, Mexico,” the label for a February 21, 1896, negative in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum. A researcher searching the collection for “Bat Masterson” or “Judge Roy Bean” never would have found this photo!



The image shows Fitzsimmons (at right, top photo, opposite page) trying to avoid a punch from Maher. The referee may bear a resemblance to Wyatt Earp, however, the man is George Siler. Although Earp reportedly helped Bean promote the match, no records suggest he attended the fight that day.

Sure would have been great if Earp had refereed this match, given such a fabulous view of the referee among the boxers, which the photographer had only 96 seconds to capture before the knockout. But alas, as far as I know, we have no comparative view of Earp refereeing the Tom Sharkey fight against Fitzsimmons later that year.

Bat Masterson (below) watched over the \$15,000 purse. Based on this view of the boxing match, Peter Maher appeared to have the upper hand, with Bob Fitzsimmons (at right) ducking to avoid his punch, but Fitzsimmons got the better of his man.

— ALL IMAGES COURTESY J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM EXCEPT THE BIRD’S-EYE-VIEW AND BAT MASTERSON PHOTOS: TRUE WEST ARCHIVES —



What we do have is an opposite view of the fight, showing the American side, that changes the perspective offered by the bird's-eye-view photograph that showed just the ring, with a few attendees and no punches being thrown.

Those who read the account published by the *Brownsville Herald* in Texas on February 22, 1896, had an equally one-sided view of the scene: "In the centre of a canvass [sic] walk about two hundred feet in diameter, the ring was pitched. The board floor was covered with canvass [sic] over which rosen was sprinkled. At one side was the frame compartment for the taking by the Kinetoscope [sic] of the pictures of the fight as it proceeded but the machine would not work today, because of the dark weather."

The 16-foot circus canvas enclosing the ring was meant to keep the view of the fight limited to only the ticket buyers. But the promoters were not successful in that regard, as New York's *The Journal* pointed out, also on February 22.

"To the west, sloping down to the very foot of the enclosure, was a mountain 500 feet in height, rugged and almost perpendicular. Across the river, on the Texas side, was its counterpart, and commanding a full view of the ring were some three hundred men and women, who looked like pigeons to those below....all was ready, 182 people were at the ring side, the remainder of the visiting party, with the local contingent, having decided that a view from the Texas hills was preferable to the expenditure of \$20 for a ticket."

Thanks to an unknown photographer on the Mexico side of the border, however, historians have this excellent photograph of a fight where Masterson kept watch over the

purse money and ticket sales.

The photographer doesn't seem to be anyone associated with the motion picture company. "After Fitzsimmons and his party had come up to the railway station Ernest Rector, the kinetoscope man, came to him with a proposition to fight Maher six rounds in front of his machine, which would not work today because of the dark weather," *The Herald* of Los Angeles, California, reported on February 22.

Rector was not successful in his endeavor, as Fitzsimmons demanded

\$5,000 and 50 percent of the receipts for the privilege of being filmed. Another type of film ended up capturing him for posterity, and not in the best light, given the ultimate result.

Somebody with a still camera certainly punched above his weight that day! ✘

