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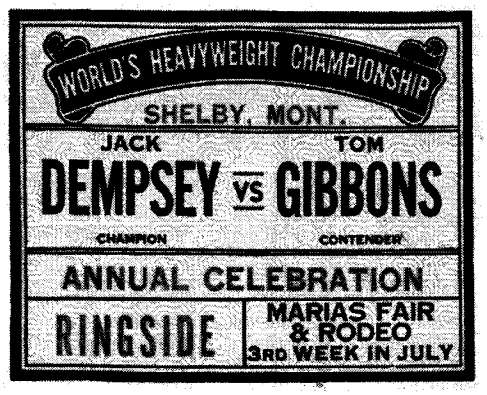

CHAMPIONS PARK

Commemorating the World Heavyweight Championship Fight
July 4, 1923
Shelby, Montana

Who would ever think to bring a world heavyweight championship fight to the dusty, desolate prairies of northern Montana? Many must have said this when news spread of Shelby, Montana's bid to bring champion, Jack Dempsey to defend his World Heavyweight Boxing Championship title against hard hitting, Tommy Gibbons in a 1923 boxing extravaganza.

Happen, it did! Dubbed, "The Fight That Won't Stay Dead", the 4th of July sporting event was hailed as boxing's most historical event. What began as a real-estate stunt and ended in a spectacular fiasco, became the legend of Shelby, Montana. Almost overnight, the discovery of oil in the Kevin-Sunburst fields by Gordon Campbell in March of 1922 sparked an incredible economic boom for Toole County and the county seat, Shelby. Shelby was hailed as the "Tulsa of the West". Headlines sited it as the fastest growing city in the U.S. With this tremendous influx of oilfield workers and their families, Shelby businessman, James A. Johnson and his son, James W. (Body) Johnson set to work selling lots and buildings, small office spaces, houses and apartments to meet the tremendous demand. As 1922 drew to a close and a long winter ensued in northern Montana, the real estate market slowed down. Ever the shrewd businessman, James W. Johnson, feeling the economic downturn, creatively hatched the "big fight" idea as a publicity stunt to bring renewed attention to Shelby and hopefully spur business. Johnson and his cohorts overshadowed Montreal's $100,000 bid by offering an impressive $200,000 – roughly the equivalent of $2.15 million in modern dollars – if Dempsey would come to town and fight a heavyweight title bout.

There was no backing out now as the bid was accepted. Even Montana's Governor, Joseph Dixon told Johnson at the time, "Body, just where are you ever going to get $200,000? Hell, man, there isn't that much money in the whole state of Montana!" Yet, momentum kept building. Tommy Gibbons, a light-heavyweight out of St. Paul, Minnesota and an up-and-coming boxer, was chosen as Dempsey's opponent. The American Legion brought in its state commander, Loy Molumby Jr., as its chief representative and negotiator.

In May, Molumby traveled to Chicago to sign a contract with Dempsey's manager, Jack Kearns and turn over the first $100,000 payment. Somehow during this whirlwind trip to the "Windy City", Molumby handed over the money and came home with his name on a

new document that locked Shelby into an additional $100,000 obligation. Claiming Kearns wouldn't go for less; Molumby had set up Shelby to pay Dempsey $300,000 to fight in Shelby.

Shelby couldn't turn back now. Construction of the arena started just seven weeks prior to the 4th of July event. The 40,000 seat arena was the biggest outdoor arena in America at the time. Body Johnson scrambled to raise the second payment of $100,000 relying on private loans from his father and friends, quite possibly bank President George Stanton.

Just two weeks prior to the fight, Kearns, fearing nonpayment of the last $100,000, threatened a cancellation of the fight. Reports throughout the last days of June caste doubt on the event. Jack Dempsey finally stepped in to assure organizers that a bout would take place, but the damage had been done. Rail services has been cancelled for special trains, advance reservations cancelled and fight fans stayed home.

The hot, July day provided the backdrop for Shelby's most infamous event. The 40,000 seat arena held a mere 8,000 ticket holders, before an additional 4,000 ranchers and farmers stormed the gates prior to the opening round bell. And what a fight they witnessed! The Dempsey-Gibbons fight was the only World's Heavyweight Boxing Championship that Jack Dempsey ever fought that went the full fifteen rounds including his championship fights with Gene Tunney in 1926 and 1927 that were both 10 rounds each.

I give you this glimpse of boxing history to campaign on behalf of the Champions Park Committee to build an interpretive historical center commemorating the 1923 fight. A group of dedicated citizens have been diligently working for several years to complete the park on the original fight sight with a full size ring holding life size bronzes of Jack Dempsey, Tommy Gibbons and the referee. Kiosks throughout the park will depict pictures and audio highlights recounting fight events as well as feature the history of northern Montana homesteading, the oil and gas industry and the railroad. The Committee has thus far raised approximately $150,000 of the estimated $500,000 price tag. Funds thus far, have been raised through private donations.

Nationally recognized, sculptor, Gareth Curtiss has created commemorative bronzes of the fighters as well as smaller boxing gloves. In addition, he has also designed lithographs of the event, all for sale as part of a commemorative collection. This sequence numbered commemorative collection is available to the first 20 collectors. Individual pieces are also available for sale. Proceeds from the sale of the fight memorabilia will be used for Champions Park development.

Embrace a piece of history…Embrace a piece of Shelby's heritage….Embrace Champions Park with your commitment.