

FRED FULTON, THE ROCHESTER PLASTERER



ANNE BEISER ALLEN

Among the outstanding prizefighters of 1918, Minnesota's own Fred Fulton was widely regarded as the most likely to take Jess Willard's world heavyweight crown—if he could only get the champ to agree to a duel. Dodging and weaving, Willard avoided the match until Fulton accepted a fight with a little-known boxer named Jack Dempsey—and lost his contender's standing within the first seconds of the bout. During his 20-year career, Fulton, the “Rochester Plasterer,” fought most of the leading boxers of his time. He won some big fights and lost others, retiring with a strong record that deserves to be remembered.

Frederick T. Fulton was born on April 18, 1891, in Blue Rapids, Kansas, the second in a large family—both in numbers and physical size. As an adult, Fred stood six feet five inches tall, weighed more than 200 pounds and, according to one of his opponents, had the longest reach of any man. “He can . . . hit you on the chin when he is sitting down,” said Ed “Gunboat” Smith.¹

World heavyweight contender Fred Fulton, publicity photo, about 1917

By 1907 the 16-year-old Fulton had moved to Rochester, Minnesota, where he worked as a plasterer. An outgoing, congenial lad, he was a popular member of the city's laboring community. In November 1908 he married Isabelle "Belle" Sobles, and the young couple moved to Nebraska. About a year later they returned to Rochester, where Fulton resumed plastering. While in Nebraska, Fred had met Tommy Dixon, a bantam-weight fighter from Kansas City, who later claimed that he had taught Fred the rudiments of boxing.²

At that time, prizefighting—professionals boxing for money—was illegal in Minnesota and most other states. Many people regarded it as uncouth and hardly deserving designation as a sport. Boxing's physical violence and spectator gambling were anathema to religious leaders and to the women lobbying against liquor and for women's suffrage. In 1892 the Minnesota legislature had banned prizefighting.³

John L. Sullivan, the last of the bare-knuckle champions and world heavyweight titlist from 1882 to 1892, had done much to popularize boxing, however. His advocacy of gloved fighting and the increased use of the Marquis of Queensberry Rules brought a new, somewhat more civilized standard to the sport. Rounds, which had previously continued until one of the contestants went down, were limited to three minutes, with a minute between. If a man went down, he had ten seconds to get back



Amateurs from the Minnesota Boat Club practicing boxing—with gloves—about 1890

on his feet and his opponent was required to wait in a corner. No wrestling or hugging was allowed, and the fighters' seconds could not enter the ring during rounds. Gloves were to be fair-sized, new, and of the best quality; shoes or boots could not have springs in them. First devised for amateur boxers in 1867, the Queensberry rules became the tournament norm during the late 1890s.⁴

Boxing was added to the roster of modern Olympic games in 1904, raising the prestige of amateur fights, but prizefighting remained a shady pastime, supported mostly by the laboring classes and gamblers. Bouts were staged surreptitiously in secluded rural settings or on boats in the middle of boundary rivers, making it hard to determine which police force had jurisdiction. Raids so frequently disrupted fights that the Queensberry rules instructed referees to name a time and place for an interrupted fight to resume.⁵

By Fred Fulton's time in the 1910s, the public attitude toward the sport was beginning to change. In 1908 Jack Johnson, a black fighter from Galveston, had defeated Canadian

Tommy Burns to win the world boxing championship, infuriating U.S. journalists. Not only was Johnson black, it was reported that he was also arrogant and dated white women—none of which endeared him to the white community. The term "White Hope" evolved from the appeal by Jack London, then a reporter for the *New York Herald*, for a white fighter to take the title back from the African American upstart.⁶

Although prizefighting was illegal in Minnesota, wrestling was considered a legitimate sport. In the early-twentieth century, almost every town hall in the state hosted regular matches. Rochester had an active program, with weekly bouts in the Metropolitan Theater. Fred Fulton soon made a name for himself as a wrestler, his size and "wonderful strength," as the *Olmsted County Democrat* put it, compensating for a lack of "scientific" skill. By 1912 Fulton's wrestling skill had attracted the notice of Twin Cities sportswriter Frank Force. According to Fulton's son, Norman, the Mayo brothers

Anne Allen, a researcher and writer whose biographical sketches have appeared in several popular history magazines, is also the author of An Independent Woman: The Life of Lou Henry Hoover (2000).

were also interested in Fred's athletic ability, and they arranged a job for him with the Minneapolis police force so that he could begin training as a boxer at the police gymnasium.⁷

With Force as his manager, Fulton began working out in Minneapolis gyms and competing in Hudson, Wisconsin, where prizefighting was legal. In his first professional match, held in 1913, he knocked out Jack Stone in the second round. A series of successful fights followed, and by the end of the year, Fred had racked up five knock-outs and one win by decision. He also fought two four-round exhibitions with men whose names were already well-known: "White Hopes" Luther McCarty from Nebraska and Billy Miske of St. Paul.⁸

Fulton's rise continued through the early part of the next year. In April 1914, however, he lost to Carl Morris on a foul, and in May he was knocked out by Al Palzer in the fourth round.⁹ These consecutive defeats damaged Fred's reputation.

Unable to arrange further bouts in Hudson, Force decided in September to take Fred to San Francisco, a major center of the boxing world. There Fulton won two matches and fought an exhibition with former star boxer Kid McCoy. Fulton's prize money barely covered his expenses, however, and Force decided he could no longer afford to be his manager. The two parted amicably, and the young plasterer returned to Rochester, where he rented space in a building on Zumbro Street and opened a gymnasium. He invited local men to spar with him and taught youngsters the basics of the trade.¹⁰

Another man had his eye on Fred by this time. Mike Collins, a Hudson promoter who staged boxing matches, thought Fred had potential. Collins was a better manager than

6 ROUND BOXING
CONTEST
 and 2 Wrestling Bouts

SOMERSET WIS.

THURSDAY, Dec 10 '08

The Boxing Contest will be between
Geo. Barton and **Mike Gibbons**
of St. Paul of Minneapolis
Two of the fastest linears north of Chicago

The first wrestling bout will be between two local men from Wisconsin
Joseph Revord and **Leo Revoy**, best 2 out of 3 falls

The second wrestling bout will be between
JOHN ALBRECHT Champion Middle Weight Champion of the Twin Cities and
Tony Hilstrom CHAMPION OF BURLINGTON, IOWA. Best 2 out of 3, strangle hold barred
 PIN FALLS ONLY TO COUNT

ALL THESE CONTESTS WILL BE STRICTLY ON THEIR MERIT. The Best Man Wins

MIKE COLLINS, HUDSON, W

Matches of well-known athletes promoted by Mike Collins, Fulton's manager-to-be, 1908

Force, and Fulton's career began to move forward. Collins arranged sparring partners and trainers to improve the 24-year-old fighter's skills and badgered other fighters into facing Fred. He was also a good publicist, feeding frequent statements to the press about his man's condition and plans.¹¹

Meanwhile, during 1914, boxing supporters in Minnesota had been busy lobbying the legislature to repeal the ban on prizefights. Some claim that this drive was sparked by the success of local talent. Mike Gibbons, a St. Paul native, achieved prominence as a middleweight fighter in 1911. He and his younger brother

Tommy, who fought both middle- and heavyweight bouts, became the darlings of the Twin Cities sporting community. Billy Miske and Mike O'Dowd, the "St. Paul Cyclone," were also winning national reputations.¹²

Lobbyists' arguments also gained strength from the fact that prizefighting was now legal in some other states—most notably Wisconsin, which was profiting from fights staged in Hudson for Twin Cities clientele. A bill to legalize boxing passed the state legislature on April 24, 1915, only a few weeks after Jess Willard defeated Jack Johnson in a 26-round battle in Havana, Cuba, thus "retrieving" the heavyweight

championship for the white race.¹³ Publicity surrounding that event may have tipped the Minnesota scales toward boxing.

The new law created a three-man athletic commission, appointed by the governor, to regulate all matches and exhibitions. It had the authority to issue or revoke licenses to promoters, boxers, managers, and referees and to investigate complaints. Prizefights would be allowed only in cities with a population greater than 50,000 (in effect limiting them to the Twin Cities and Duluth), although exceptions could be made. Ten percent of the gate was to be deposited in the state treasury to maintain tuberculosis sanitoriums.¹⁴

At that time, each state regulated boxing according to its own laws. While there was general agreement about the rules, the length of matches (from four to ten to an undetermined number of rounds) and the method of determining the winner varied. A knock-out was always a win, but some states allowed officials to decide the winner based on overall performance, while others—notably, New York from 1911 to 1920—did not. Weight divisions had been established (eight for professional fights, ten for amateur), with the heavyweight title (over 175 pounds) becoming the most prestigious. The National Boxing Association, established in 1921, worked for a greater uniformity of practice.¹⁵

It was the promoters' responsibility to line up boxers and provide the venue for a fight or series of fights. With the money from ticket sales, they would pay expenses: rent for the facility, prizes for the winners according to previously negotiated arrangement (which could include

a guaranteed fee for the loser if his reputation enabled his manager to demand one), and the state's percentage.

To guarantee a steady income, many fighters supplemented their prize money by traveling with entertainment companies or by giving exhibition matches against local talent. An exhibition match was just that: a chance for a professional to demonstrate his moves against a live competitor. It usually ran two-to-four rounds and offered no prizes. Neither fighter was expected to make a serious effort, although sometimes the temptation for the unknown to enhance his reputation by giving the pro a hard time was difficult to resist.¹⁶

Manager Collins's most successful gimmick on Fred Fulton's behalf occurred on May 14, 1915, when champ Jess Willard came to Rochester with a Wild West show and circus. The show advertised that Willard would demonstrate the blows he had used in his fight with Johnson. Collins arranged for Fulton to box Willard in an exhibition match, and Fred decked the champion, a feat in which he would forever take pride. "I have boxed with him twice," Fred wrote to Rochester's *Post & Record* in December 1915. "When we boxed at Rochester last summer he nailed me in the mouth and it hurt but I knocked him flat."¹⁷ (There is no record of his having met Willard a second time; Fulton was prone to exaggerate.)

Although Willard had won the world heavyweight title, many fans felt that he was not, in fact, the best boxer on earth. He had, they contended, only showed an ability to withstand punishment from a fighter who was out of shape after three years of self-imposed exile. Johnson had fled the U.S. to avoid a one-year

sentence under the Mann Act for "transporting a white woman" across state lines "for immoral purposes"—in other words, traveling with a woman who was not his wife. There were constant efforts to match Willard with other "White Hopes," but the wily champion preferred to travel with his circus show. (During his four years as champion, he would only



Bare-knuckle pose of Fulton, October 26, 1914—the day he beat "White Hope" Al Kaufman in San Francisco

defend his title twice—in a 1916 no-decision battle against Frank Moran, and in 1919, when he lost to Jack Dempsey.)¹⁸

So, in 1915 Fred Fulton had good reason to think his chances of becoming champion were as strong as any other fighter's. He was young, he was strong, and he loved to fight. For most of the year, Fulton worked in Rochester. There was real money to be made in boxing, if you were good enough and fought often enough. A newspaper report in 1916 described Mike Gibbons's financial situation: the former tinsmith owned "several apartments in St. Paul, a \$12,000 residence facing Lake Como, extensive land holdings in northern Minnesota and a summer home at Osakis," with a total worth of \$150,000—all earned by boxing.¹⁹

Although Fulton does not appear to have been as shrewd an investor as Gibbons, he lived well on his earnings. He bought a car and had it adapted to fit his long legs. In 1917 he was reported to have a silent interest in a Minneapolis saloon (which presumably closed when prohibition began in 1919), and in 1923 he would buy a summer resort near Park Rapids.²⁰

Things were looking good for Fred. He won nine out of ten fights in 1915 by knockouts. Although his match on August 27 with Arthur Pelkey, "the man who outboxed and outpunched Jess Willard," was officially listed as no decision, there were those who thought that Fulton had been the better fighter. Fred was one of them. "I won every round. It was a great fight. Knocked him down five times in the 6th and 7th rounds. The bell saved him. There was a good crowd and everyone was well pleased," he wired his hometown newspaper.²¹



Fred Fulton (left) towers over boxer Arthur Pelkey of New York (right) and an unidentified "fight promoter," probably Mike Collins

By the end of 1915, Mike Collins had managed to line up a bout with the great Jess Willard himself in New Orleans the following March. Meanwhile, Fred signed on to a ten-week vaudeville tour and staged a triumphant performance at Rochester's Metropolitan Theater in December. A 1973 tribute to Fulton described how he had carried a big black suitcase labeled "Fred Fulton, World Champion." In his act, he wore a tuxedo and top hat, white tie, and tails and carried a cane. One morning in

Denver, he joined his manager for breakfast wearing the full formal outfit. Collins said, "Fred, people don't wear formal clothes to breakfast." Said Fred, "These yokels won't know the difference."²²

But to Fulton's dismay, the New Orleans promoters decided that he was not a big enough calling card. The Fulton-Willard bout was canceled, and Frank Moran was given the match instead. Undaunted, Collins arranged for Fred to meet some of the other major title contenders.

In January 1916 he defeated Dan “Porky” Flynn in 20 rounds in New Orleans, and on April 28 he knocked out Al Reich, the former amateur boxing champion, in the ninth round in New York City. A few weeks before the Reich fight, Fred signed a five-year contract with Collins.²³

Willard, who was touring with his Wild West show, refused to talk about setting up a fight until the fall, so Fred took the summer of 1916 off. He toured briefly with the A. G. Barnes circus, demonstrating his favorite moves, but he didn’t care for the life. Even though he traveled in his own special train car and was paid \$1,000 a week, he decided after a month, “Nix on the circus stuff. I am through.”²⁴

Instead, he rented a pavilion at Lake Shady near Oronoco, not far from Rochester, and with the help of M. D. Barnes ran a dance hall and picnic concession. “The Saturday night dances will continue to be given, but they will be conducted under the strictest supervision,” he assured the public, “and I will be the bouncer.” For his family, which now included a baby boy, he rented a cottage overlooking the lake, where the Mayo brothers and other wealthy Rochester families had summer cabins. In his spare time he sparred in a makeshift ring at the pavilion.²⁵

He also fired his manager, claiming that Collins got him plenty of publicity but little hard cash. Fulton was also uncomfortable about the legal status of his contract with Collins. He and his first manager, Frank Force, had always gotten along well, and when Force had released him in early 1915, it was with the understanding that the contract could be reinstated. According to Force, this contract still had two years to run. And with Fulton looking more like a successful

contender for the big title, Force was eager to resume as manager.²⁶

Collins was furious. After several attempts at negotiation with Fred, whose temper matched the manager’s, Collins brought suit in the Wisconsin courts, claiming that Force’s contract with Fulton was not legal because boxing had not been legal in Minnesota when it was signed. Therefore, Collins’s contract, signed in Wisconsin, took precedence. Force countered that since the Collins contract had been signed in Wisconsin, it had no standing in Minnesota where Fred resided.²⁷ The squabble would drag on for almost a year.

Meanwhile, Fred was having problems in Oronoco. On July 15 he had taken exception to the presence at the pavilion of one Fern “Texas” Monroe, and when the young woman refused to leave, he had thrown her into the lake. “Texas” then threatened to take him to court. Her reputation, however, was none too good, and the local police offered to testify to that effect. In the end, she decided to leave town. The episode strengthened the hand of a group of Oronoco citizens who objected to activities at the pavilion, however, and they won a temporary injunction to close it. The pavilion reopened ten days later, but by then Fred was ready to resume serious training in Minneapolis.²⁸

During this time, Force continued lining up top fighters for Fred. The Rochester Plasterer fought Dan “Porky” Flynn to a no-decision ten rounder in St. Paul on September 8, 1916, a highlight of the Minnesota State Fair. In October he knocked out Andre Anderson in the first round of a fight in Eau Claire.²⁹

Force also took out a \$150,000 insurance policy on his man, which

the local newspaper “believed to be the largest insurance policy ever issued to a prize fighter.” In the event of his death, Fulton’s wife, Belle, and Frank Force would each receive \$50,000. The remaining \$50,000 was to insure Fred’s hands. Broken hands were a common occupational hazard; several times, Fred fought with a broken hand after a doctor anesthetized it with a shot of cocaine.³⁰

In the first months of 1917 Fulton—who entered the ring dressed in a brightly colored Navajo robe over his shorts—fought in New York, knocking out Tom Cowler and Charlie Weinert and losing by a foul to Carl Morris. Force complained that Morris had fouled Fred several times without being charged and insisted that Fred should have been declared the winner. Mike Collins, who was ringside that night, demanded \$1,000 of Fred’s earnings, citing his contract, and Fred paid him.³¹

By this time, New York had become the center of the boxing world. Fred enjoyed sitting in cafes with other leading fighters, exchanging gossip while his manager attempted to strike deals for future matches. The boxing fraternity was a congenial one, and Fulton made a number of good friends among those he fought.³²

The legal dispute with Mike Collins finally ended in mid-April 1917. It had become clear to Fred that his career had progressed further under Collins’s guidance than under Force’s. Collins resumed management of the 26-year-old, who then had to settle with Force and his lawyers, paying another \$1,000 to clear the air. Fulton was distressed by the episode. “The old contract was nullified when I went back to Force,” he explained. “We agreed we would go 50—50 on



A dapper Fred Fulton, who enjoyed socializing with fellow boxers as well as fighting

all receipts and Force was to pay all expenses. We received \$1700 for the Porky Flynn fight; \$450 for the Andre Anderson go; \$2000 for the Tom Cowler bout; \$5000 for beating Weinert; and \$6000 for the Morris go. Force drew his half of all of that and was to pay expenses. Now I am sued, but I don't know what for.³³

Fulton's matches for the remainder of 1917 and the early months of 1918 read like a who's who of boxing. He defeated Sam Langford, Jack Moran, Bob Devere, Ed "Gunboat" Smith, and Dan "Porky" Flynn. He won 15 out of 20 fights between January 1917 and April 1918 and even knocked out Frank Moran, the man to whom Willard had given the title bout in March 1916. The win over Langford, America's leading black

fighter, was especially satisfying. Many critics still consider Langford the best fighter America had produced up to that time. Jack Johnson barely defeated him in 1906, and thereafter refused to face him. Jack Dempsey would not agree to meet him at all. Unfortunately, the racism of the times prevented Langford from competing for the title after 1908, and many states would not allow him to fight white boxers.³⁴

But Fred couldn't pin down the one man he most wanted to meet. Never one to mince words, Fulton demanded in an interview to know why Willard was avoiding him. "Look here," he said, "there is a champion who isn't, not by no means. He prants about the country showing the curious multitude how he knocked Jack Johnson stiff, and then he disappears. He wears a lot of leather breeches and other things that remind the old timers of the Rio Grande, and gets away with it. He don't show 'em how he knocked out anybody since he and Johnson pulled off their little Havana meeting." Fred was right about one thing: Willard wasn't making much effort to defend his title. In 1916 he had purchased an interest in the 101 Ranch Wild West Show, and he seemed to find touring with it more fun than fighting.³⁵

While Fred and Collins set about proving that Fulton was the man to beat, some disquieting signs were emerging. Two of his wins and his only two losses in 1917 were by fouls rather than skill. And in early 1918 there was a run of no-decision bouts. Boxing connoisseurs had come to regard Fulton as an uneven fighter, an "in-and-outer" who raised the hopes of his followers to dizzying heights and then, inexplicably, "fizzles miserably."³⁶

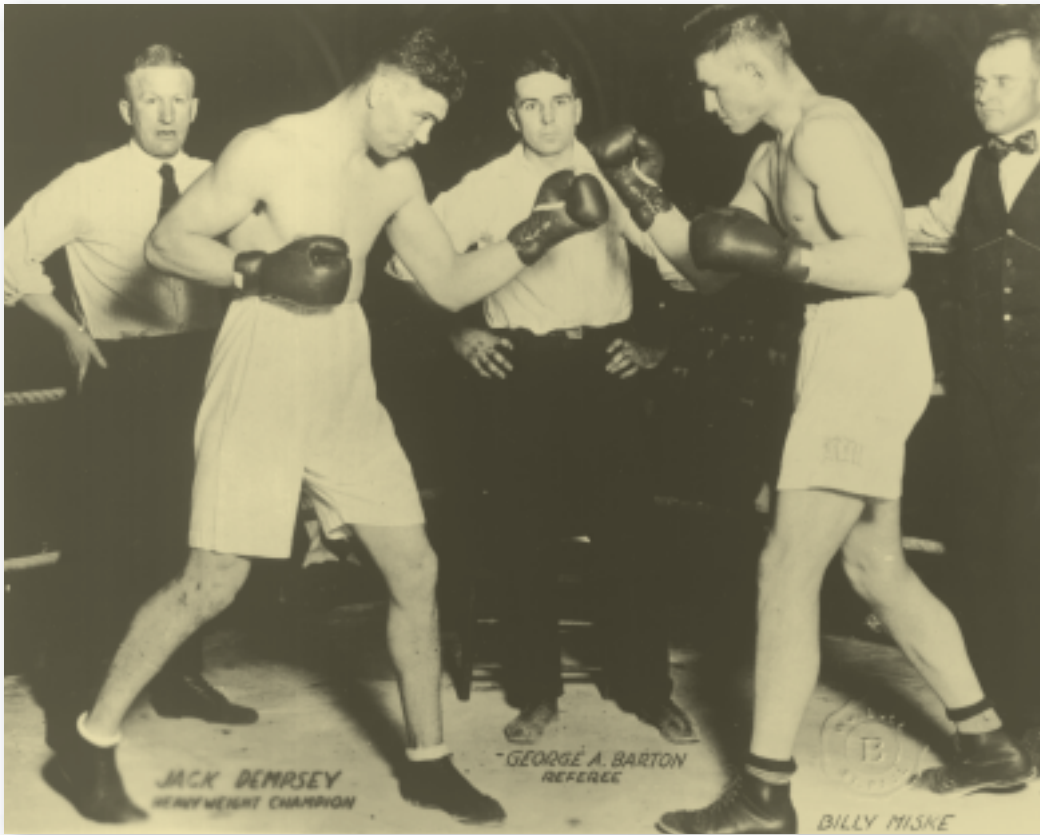
Nevertheless, many still believed

that if he ever got Willard into the ring, his chances of winning the title were the best of any man in the game. His frequent appearances kept the public interest in boxing at a high pitch. "There is more argument over whether Fulton really possesses nerve or whether his left hand is really as effective as Willard's as there is over whether the Kaiser's U-boats are built faster than they are destroyed," proclaimed United Press sportswriter H. C. Hamilton in February 1918.³⁷

That year, world events began to infringe on the boxing fraternity's obsession with a championship bout. As more and more troops were sent to Europe, the value of sporting events came into question. Why, people asked, didn't boxers join the army and fight the Kaiser's soldiers, as had so many less physically devel-

Minnesota middleweight Mike Gibbons, who volunteered to teach army recruits fist fighting, about 1920





Jack Dempsey (left) and Billy Miske posing with referee George Barton (center) before their fateful Minnesota fight, May 3, 1918. This popular image was reprinted after Dempsey won the heavyweight title in 1919.

oped young men? Mike Gibbons, the Minnesota middleweight, volunteered to train recruits in the basics of fist fighting. Other fighters put on exhibition matches for charity. Fred did neither.³⁸

Finally, Collins managed to get Willard's signature on a contract for a bout on July 4, 1918, but as the date approached, Willard began to feel pressure from media opposing the fight. Nor could the promoter find a host city. In St. Paul the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Red Cross both opposed the match; in fact, the WCTU had tried, with the help of the YMCA, to have the Minnesota boxing law repealed. Claiming that he could do nothing in the face of "one hundred angry women," the promoter announced on May 11 that the fight was off.³⁹

"If they don't want me to fight Fulton, I'm through," Willard was quoted as saying. He retired to the ranch he had recently bought in Kansas and prepared to raise cattle as his contribution to the war effort. As compensation, Collins agreed to let Fred meet Jack Dempsey on July 27.⁴⁰

According to Dempsey, his poor showing in a ten-round no-decision fight with Billy Miske in St. Paul in May had convinced the Fulton camp that Dempsey would be a "safe" opponent. A relative newcomer, he had fought mostly in his native Utah and in Colorado and Nevada. When he went east in 1916, he was knocked down by Andre Anderson in a no-decision ten-rounder in New York, refused matches with Sam Langford, Gunboat Smith, and Frank Moran, and fought two more no-decision bouts before heading west again. A

spate of wins in California in 1917 revived his reputation. Returning to the East Coast in early 1918, he defeated such prominent fighters as Carl Morris and Arthur Pelkey. Nevertheless, he remained only one of many up-and-coming fighters. The *Minneapolis Journal* considered Dempsey "a fine opponent for Fearless Fred after the latter has taken over the title."⁴¹

While draft rules were getting tighter, Fred fought exhibition matches in California, New York, and Minneapolis for the benefit of the troops. In June, married men whose wives could support themselves financially were added to the draft list. The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety announced that "Every able-bodied male must be engaged in a useful occupation"—and professional sports were not considered useful. Because Fred was in the east when his draft number came up, he

was slow in reporting to his draft board. Although he was exempt (he was supporting Isabelle and their three-year-old son), his failure to register on time caused the New York State draft board to issue a warrant for his arrest on July 24—three days before the Dempsey match. When Fulton explained that the order to appear had not reached him on time, the court dismissed the warrant.⁴²

Fred arrived at the Federal League Baseball Park in Harrison, New Jersey, on the evening of July 27, 1918, as the three-to-one favorite. At 27, he was five years older than Dempsey, outweighed him by 15 pounds, and towered a good 5½ inches above the younger man's six feet. His 84½-inch reach was consid-

erably longer than Dempsey's mere 78 inches.⁴³

The crowd was slow to gather. When the first bell rang, Fred, smiling confidently, swung his powerful left arm at Dempsey, who ducked under it and slammed his right fist into Fred's chest just over the heart. He followed with a left hook to Fred's stomach, and when Fred bent over, hit him again on the jaw. Fulton tottered back, and Dempsey hit him again with a strong left to the jaw. The fight was over. Fred lay stunned on the floor while Collins bent over him, begging him to get up—to no avail. As the Rochester paper reported, "Local Man Goes Down to Defeat Ingloriously in Eastern Arena."

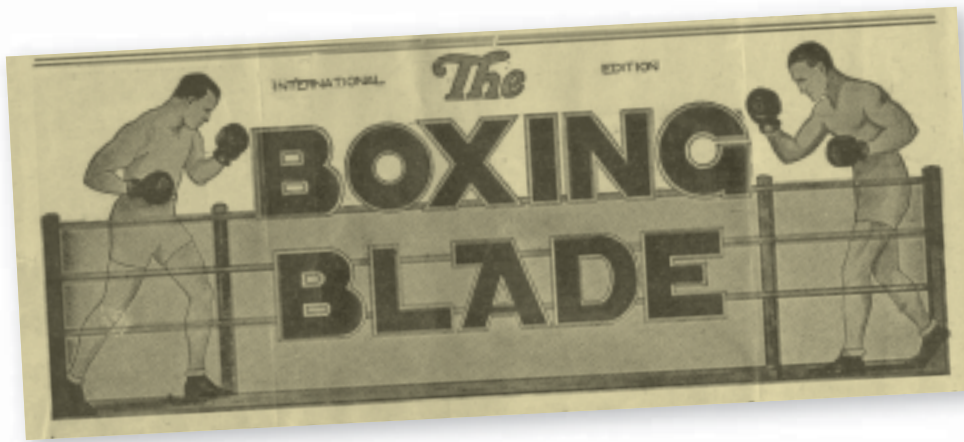
Said Jess Willard smugly, "I was

not surprised by the result, for all you have to do is to hit Fulton to have him down." Furious at seeing months of work preparing Fulton for a championship bout undone in 18 seconds, Collins resigned. The two men would never work together again. Fulton later rashly claimed that the match was a "frame up" and that he had thrown the fight.⁴⁴

With more rigorous draft requirements and public sentiment turned against sport, boxing went into a hiatus in 1918. Fulton reportedly worked in Minneapolis as a guard at the Washburn-Crosby mills, doing "his bit in that capacity" for the war effort. By November 1918, how-



Amateur boxing on deck of U.S.S. Huntington, bringing the 151st Artillery home from war in April 1919



ABOVE: Masthead, 1922, of the popular weekly magazine (10 cents per issue) published in Minneapolis by Mike Collins. RIGHT: Ad from the July 1922 *Boxing Blade* promising to “put you in first class physical condition in short time”



ever, he was back in California to fight. He had acquired a new manager but fired him in December and announced that he would handle his own affairs.⁴⁵

Handling his own affairs did not yield many fights, however. Fulton's finances went into a sharp decline, and he eventually declared bankruptcy. Finally, in August 1919 he signed with yet another manager, Tom O'Rourke, who took him to England. There, Fred scored three successive knockouts against Arthur Townley, Gordon Cogdill, and Gustave Marthuin. He would have liked to meet with John Beckett, the British champion, or Georges Carpentier, the French champ, but neither chose to fight him.⁴⁶

Returning to the United States, Fred faced Frank Moran again in an eight-round no-decision bout described in the press as “a clash between ‘has-beens.’” Fulton was still winning fights, but he was now definitely in the second tier. Dempsey had taken the title from Willard in nine minutes in 1919 and showed little interest in meeting Fulton again. Nor was Fred especially anxious to face Dempsey, although from

time to time the idea was bruited around. In July 1920 Fred suffered the fourth knockout of his career in a battle with Harry Wills, who decked him in the third round.⁴⁷ At least he was making money again and clearing up his debts.

Meanwhile, the New York and Minnesota boxing commissions had both suspended Fulton while they investigated his reckless statement that he had thrown the Dempsey match. Although both eventually reinstated him, having insufficient evidence of wrongdoing, an offer to fight in St. Paul in June 1920 was withdrawn at the insistence of “several leading members of the boxing colony.” One of them may have been Mike Collins, now a major Twin Cities boxing promoter, an incorporator of the recently formed Minnesota Boxing Club, and manager of several other fighters.⁴⁸ Collins would never forgive Fred for his performance against Dempsey.

While Fulton's career slumped, the popularity of boxing was increasing. Young men who had learned the rudiments at army train-

ing camps now considered themselves connoisseurs of the art. As one historian put it, “The barbarism of real war made boxing seem civilized.” The newly formed American Legion posts supported amateur boxing with great enthusiasm and sometimes sponsored professional fights. And now, women were often present as spectators.⁴⁹

Another factor in the rising popularity was the charisma of Jack Dempsey, deftly handled by the great promoter Tex Rickard. A much more colorful character than Jess Willard and a more intense fighter, Dempsey was also more active. He defended his title six times between 1919 and 1926 before losing to Gene Tunney and performed at least 30 exhibition bouts. His fight with French champion Georges Carpentier on July 2, 1921, was held before the largest crowd seen until that time. The first fight broadcast over the radio, it brought in more than \$1 million.

Dempsey also performed in movies and in vaudeville.⁵⁰

Renewed public enthusiasm for prizefighting made it possible for Fulton and others like him to continue their careers. In 1921 Fulton won ten fights, all of them by knockouts, including one in November against Carl Morris—finally erasing the memory of Morris’s win over him in 1914.⁵¹

But Fulton’s most satisfying victory must have been the one held in his hometown on November 11, 1921, when he entered the ring to a rousing ovation and was introduced as the “challenger for the heavyweight crown”—a title no one else was then giving him. He is said to have smiled the entire four minutes it took him to flatten his opponent, Jack Heinan.⁵²

The Rochester match was the last permitted in Minnesota’s smaller communities as exceptions to the 1915 law that had restricted prizefights to large cities. Places like Rochester had been holding matches under the auspices of the American Legion; now, a newly selected boxing commission intended to allow no exceptions. The Fulton-Heinan fight (attendance was believed to be the highest of any boxing event held outside the Twin Cities) was permitted only because it was part of the American Legion Veterans’ Day celebration.⁵³

After his string of successes in 1921, Fulton began to falter. He was 30 years old and losing some of the edge his youth had given him. Fighting again without a manager (by May 1921 O’Rourke had left his employ), he made a poor showing against Bartley Madden in New York in a January 1922 bout that ended in a draw. Fulton’s “notorious lack of



Ailing boxer Billy Miske, about 1920

fighting instinct was never more prominent,” wrote one reporter. He won his next three fights, then stumbled to a draw and a no decision.⁵⁴

On August 25 he met Billy Miske in Minneapolis. It was not Fred’s finest hour. Miske had retired from the ring in 1919 because of ill health—he would die in 1924—but returned because he needed money. Even so, it took him only three minutes to knock Fred out. According to sportswriter Dick Cullum, Mike Collins was at ringside, and when Fred went down, the manager “jumped to the apron of the ring and taunted Fulton for his poor showing. At this Fulton attacked Collins and the commotion at ringside was a better show than the fight.”⁵⁵

Perhaps Fulton’s mediocre record in 1922 was due, in part, to his lack of a manager. For most boxers, a manager was a painful necessity. He could claim up to 50 percent of the boxer’s earnings, and many prizes—especially in the lower echelons—barely covered the cost of preparing for the fight. On the other hand, it took time and skill to arrange fights, deal with the opponent’s manager and promoters, and negotiate finan-

cial arrangements. Fred was not the only fighter to attempt to be his own manager (even the great Dempsey tried it), but the results were almost always unsatisfactory.⁵⁶

The year 1923 was another bad one for Fred. His only win was against Francis “Farmer” Lodge in Minneapolis on November 23. Minneapolis fans had never taken to Fulton, but that night they gave him an ovation as he stepped into the ring, and when he kicked Lodge once when he was down, the crowd loved it. A capacity house watched the Rochester Plasterer take his opponent out in under three minutes. Fred was especially pleased with the win because Mike Collins was Lodge’s manager.⁵⁷

Fulton had some early successes the next year but reached bottom on November 17, 1924, when he faced Tony Fuente in Los Angeles. The fight lasted all of 35 seconds. Fuente threw two blows, neither of which, according to some observers, seemed to strike Fulton, but Fulton fell to the mat and took the full count. “The big bum laid down cold,” his new manager said in disgust.⁵⁸

Fred claimed he had a weak heart and that Fuente had struck him full in the chest. But two men later testified that Fulton had told them before the fight not to put any money on him, that he was in no shape to fight but would be paid \$4,000 to “lie down.” He had wanted to wait until the fourth round, but Fuente’s manager had insisted that his boy win in the first round or there would be no match. This fight was the last to be held under a California law that allowed no cash prizes to be awarded, only a medallion worth no more than \$35.

Charges were filed against the boxers and their managers, all of

whom pleaded innocent. While little hard evidence emerged, no one could deny that Fred seemed to have given away the fight, and he was fined \$500 and banned from boxing in California on grounds of inept performance. Back in Minnesota, the Rochester *Daily Post & Record* printed a picture of him labeled “The Ring’s Greatest Diver!”

Because prizefighting and gambling had long been closely allied, charges of selling out were frequent. Managers often bet on their fighters. Although organized crime did not begin fixing fights until the 1930s, boxers could be tempted to take a bribe, especially when a fight’s terms were not very lucrative.⁵⁹

Fulton’s earlier claim that his bout with Dempsey was fixed invites

speculation, even though he was exonerated. Fred would have been foolish to jeopardize the prospect of a shot at Willard’s title by deliberately losing to Dempsey. In 1973, however, sportswriter Dick Cullum stated that Dempsey’s manager had asked Fulton—without Dempsey’s knowledge—to stage a close fight, inflicting no real pain, in order to build a better crowd for a rematch.⁶⁰ At the Fuente match six years later, when Fulton’s career was slipping and California was enforcing its no-prize-money law more strictly, it might have been much more tempting to hedge his bets.

After the Fuente fight, Fred’s boxing career was all but over. He fought three bouts in 1925 and was knocked out each time. After the last of these, a sportswriter described “an old Fulton, flabby and worn and punchless,” who put up a brave battle for five rounds before succumbing.⁶¹ A March 1930 fight with Tom Havel in St. Paul ended in a draw, and in his final outing, against Kid Fetting in Grand Forks in May 1933, the 42-year-old Fulton was knocked out in the second round.

There was no doubt that Fred Fulton loved boxing; many reports of his fights refer to the wide grin he wore when he entered the ring. By the mid-1920s, however, he was considering retirement while he still had his health. In 1923 Fulton had bought the White City Resort on Fish Hook Lake near Park Rapids. Always gregarious, he had made many friends around the state who patronized his summer resort, which he ran for nearly 40 years.⁶²

During that time, Fulton’s life saw some changes. He and Belle divorced in about 1930, and both eventually

FISH HOOK LAKE. A very attractive lake with much shoreline and wide sandy bathing beaches. Lake safe for stand-up, motorboat (100 ft. limit) and other small fishing boats. All-around good fishing lake. In 1927 Fish Hook Lake and river produced 13% of the total catch for the season.

White City Resort
New Sand, Modern Housekeeping, Swims, Sun Deck, Cuckles, Electric Lights (100 ft. L.), SHOWER BATHS
Well insulated for comfort in summer and warmth in Fall or Winter
The Region's Finest and Safest Clean Sand Bathing Beach
Traffic Parking with 100 A. C. Current
FRED FULTON, Phone 5-F-25, Park Rapids

Come To *Camp Ohio* This Year
ON FISH HOOK LAKE
Where Fishing is of the Finest to be Had
New Completely Equipped Garage
NEW, SAFE, NON-FIREABLE BOATS
JOS. S. HENKLE PARK RAPIDS, MINN.

Ad from Fuller’s 1938 Fisherman’s Golden Book and Fishing Directory promising amenities at Fulton’s resort, including “the region’s finest and safest clean sand bathing beach”

remarried. In 1959 Fred visited New York City, where he appeared as a guest on the television show *This Is Your Life’s* tribute to Jack Dempsey. The two retired pugilists exchanged stories and relived their 1918 battle. Fulton returned to the north woods and his resort, retiring in about 1965 to a cottage on Fish Hook Lake. He died in Park Rapids on July 3, 1973, at age 82.⁶³

In an obituary tribute, *Minneapolis Tribune* sports columnist Dick Cullum described Fulton as “a big, ingenuous country boy with a great ego and a tremendous punch.” Although Twin Citians never took



Bad press in the hometown newspaper, Rochester’s Daily Post & Record, November 28, 1924

him to their hearts as they did the Gibbons brothers, Fulton had maintained his place in the state's sporting history. Both the Minneapolis *Tribune* and the *Star* took note of his passing.⁶⁴

How good was Fred Fulton? When in top form, he could be very good indeed. He fought 109 times and scored 66 knock-outs; between 1913 and 1918, he scored 36 knock-outs out of 64 fights and won another 6 by decisions. He himself was only knocked out ten times, mostly in the last years of his career. Nat Fleischer, editor of *Ring* maga-

zine from 1922 until the late 1980s and a recognized boxing authority, rated Fulton's left-handed punch among the top ten in the business. But for no apparent reason Fred also lost several fights he should have won. George Blair, retired historian of the International Boxing Research Organization, ranked Fulton as Minnesota's fourth-best heavyweight boxer, behind Tommy Gibbons, Billy Miske, and Lee Savold.⁶⁵

Jess Willard has never been considered one of America's great fighters. His major assets were his size, his strength, and his endurance.⁶⁶ Fred Fulton was a good match for him in the first two categories, and

with his powerful punch, he might have overcome the third. It is more than possible that if Fulton had faced Willard in 1918, he would have won the world heavyweight championship. Whether he could have held it against the ascendant Dempsey is another story.

In his autobiography, Jack Dempsey described Fulton as, beyond a doubt, the number-one challenger in the country in 1918. It was his win over Fulton, he firmly believed, that made it possible for him to qualify to take on Willard for the championship. "He had fought them all," Dempsey said of Fred Fulton, the Rochester Plasterer.⁶⁷ □

Notes

1. *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 4, 1973, p. C3; Norman Fulton telephone interview with author, Dec. 7, 2000; *New York Times*, July 28, 1918, sec. 2, p. 5; *Daily Post & Record* (Rochester), May 27, 1920, p. 8.

2. *Daily Post & Record*, Nov. 13, 1908, p. 7, Apr. 4, 1917, p. 5; Fulton interview.

3. Theodore Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 534; Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 5–6; Junior Pioneer Assn., "Tough Times: The Sometime Fortunes of Boxing in Early Minnesota," *Ramsey County History* 13 (Spring/Summer 1977): 13–16.

4. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 7–8, 10, 26On22; www.hickoksports.com/history/marqrule.shtml.

5. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 6; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/law.htm.

6. John D. McCallum, *The World Heavyweight Boxing Championship: A History* (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Co., 1974), 75; Gerald Suster, *Champions of the Ring* (London: Robson Books, 1992), 60, 61; Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 37; www.cyberboxingzone.com/w-hope.htm.

7. Junior Pioneer Assn., "Tough Times," 17; *Olmsted County Democrat*, May 13, 1910, p. 3; Fulton interview. On frequent wrestling see, for example, *Olmsted County Democrat*, May 13, 1910, p. 3, Mar. 10, 1911, p. 3, Dec. 8, 1911, p. 3, Apr. 19, 1912, p. 3, 6.

8. *Olmsted County Democrat*, Apr. 19, 1912, p. 3, 6, July 17, 1912, p. 3. See also *Daily Post & Record*, Mar. 22, 1917, p. 6;

www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/fulton-f.htm. Unless otherwise noted, all Fulton statistics are from this source.

9. *Daily Post & Record*, May 23, 1914, p. 5.

10. *Daily Post & Record*, Oct. 10, 1914, p. 8, Jan. 29, 1915, p. 3, Apr. 12, 1915, p. 6, July 10, 1916, p. 5, July 11, 1916, p. 5; Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 28, 62; *Rochester City Directory*, 1915. California would lose its prominence after 1911, when New York's Frawley Act again legalized boxing in the Empire State; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/law.htm.

According to Charles Johnston, historian with the International Boxing Research Organization, California law from 1915 to 1925 stipulated that boxing bouts could last no more than four rounds and limited prizes to medals worth \$25 (later \$35). While promoters respected the four-round limit, they tended to ignore the cap on prize money, and boxers regularly exchanged their medals for purses of several hundred to more than one thousand dollars, depending on the size of the gate. Side bets were another way for fighters and managers to enhance their income.

11. *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 5, 1973, p. C3. The *Daily Post & Record*, April through December 1915, ran almost weekly reports on Fulton.

12. Junior Pioneer Assn., "Tough Times," 17. See the following extensions to www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing:gibbons-m.htm, [gibbons-t.htm](http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing:gibbons-t.htm), [odowd-m.htm](http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing:odowd-m.htm), and [miske-b.htm](http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing:miske-b.htm).

13. Junior Pioneer Assn., "Tough Times,"

18; Blegen, *Minnesota*, 534; McCallum, *World Heavyweight Boxing Championship*, 81–83; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/w-hope.htm.

14. State of Minnesota, *Session Laws, 1915*, 492–95.

15. John Durant, *The Heavyweight Champions* (New York: Hastings House, 1967), 65, 99, 193; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/law.htm. Where officials were not allowed to award a win based on points and a fight reached the end of the permitted number of rounds without a knockout, it was declared a "no decision." From 1911 to 1920, New York fighters chalked up a large number of these "no-decision" battles, leaving the fans to debate the outcome in bars and newspapers.

16. *Daily Post & Record*, May 9, 1918, p. 2; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing entries for Fulton, Dempsey, Mike and Tommy Gibbons, and Miske.

17. *Daily Post & Record*, May 8, p. 5, May 13, p. 2, July 22, p. 5, Dec. 22, p. 1—all 1915.

18. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 43, 51; Suster, *Champions of the Ring*, 65; Peter Brooke-Ball, *The Boxing Album: An Illustrated History* (New York: Smithmark Publishers, 1995), 36; McCallum, *World Heavyweight Boxing Championship*, 83–86; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/willard.htm.

19. *Daily Post & Record*, Nov. 2, 1916, p. 2.

20. *Daily Post & Record*, Aug. 7, 1918, p. 7, July 8, 1918, p. 1, Apr. 12, 1924, p. 3; Fulton interview.

21. *Daily Post & Record*, Aug. 28, 1915, p. 5; Oct. 28, 1915, p. 5.

22. *Daily Post & Record*, Nov. 24, p. 1, Dec. 3, p. 5, Dec. 4, p. 3—all 1915; *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 5, 1973, p. C3.

23. *Daily Post & Record*, Dec. 30, 1915, p. 5, July 12, 1916, p. 7; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/willard.htm.

24. *Daily Post & Record*, May 20, p. 5, June 7, p. 5; July 5, p. 3—all 1916.

25. *Daily Post & Record*, June 27, p. 2, July 5, p. 3, Aug. 8, p. 2—all 1916; Elsie Boutelle, *Oronoco, Past and Present* (Zumbrota, MN: Sommers Printing, 1983), 70.

26. *Daily Post & Record*, July 10, 1916, p. 5, July 11, 1916, p. 5.

27. *Daily Post & Record*, Aug. 30, 1916, p. 3, Mar. 22, 1917, p. 6.

28. *Daily Post & Record*, July 17, p. 2, July 19, p. 5, July 24, p. 2, July 29, p. 2, Aug. 2, p. 5, Aug. 12, p. 7, Aug. 21, p. 2—all 1916.

29. *Daily Post & Record*, Sept. 1, 1916, p. 3, Oct. 28, 1916, p. 3.

30. *Daily Post & Record*, Sept. 7, 1916, p. 2, Sept. 8, 1916, p. 1, June 20, 1917, p. 1, Jan. 22, 1918, p. 5.

31. *Daily Post & Record*, Apr. 6, p. 5, Apr. 7, p. 5, Sept. 4, p. 5—all 1917.

32. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 63; Jack Dempsey, *Dempsey, By the Man Himself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 55, 127; *Daily Post & Record*, Aug. 8, 1917, p. 5, Mar. 26, 1920, p. 8.

33. *Daily Post & Record*, Apr. 16, 1917, p. 3, Apr. 18, 1917, p. 5.

34. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 51, 74; Dempsey, *Dempsey*, 3, 62, 67; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/langford.htm; Brooke-Ball, *Boxing Album*, 42–43.

35. *Daily Post & Record*, Mar. 19, 1917, p. 3, July 16, 1917, p. 6; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/willard.htm.

36. *Daily Post & Record*, June 28, 1917, p. 7, quoting E. R. Hoskins of the *St. Paul Dispatch*. Earlier reports of misgivings appeared in the *Daily Post & Record* on Nov. 10 and Nov. 15, 1915, and Jan. 10, Sept. 11, and Oct. 2, 1916.

37. *Daily Post & Record*, Feb. 2, 1918, p. 2.

38. *Daily Post & Record*, Jan. 17, 1918, p. 3, May 8, 1918, p. 5; Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 42–43. The *Daily Post & Record*, Oct. 20, 1917, p. 1, refers to a proposed Fulton exhibition bout to be held at Camp Dodge the following week, but there is no record that it occurred.

39. *Daily Post & Record*, Jan. 29, 1917, p. 5, Mar. 16, Apr. 23, and May 11—all 1918, p. 1.

40. *Daily Post & Record*, May 18, 1918, p. 1, May 28, 1918, p. 7.

41. Dempsey, *Dempsey*, 92; Suster, *Champions of the Ring*, 85–86; Durant, *Heavyweight Champions*, 67–68; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/Dempsey.



Fulton with his trademark grin

www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/willard.htm; *Minneapolis Journal*, quoted in *Daily Post & Record*, Mar. 19, 1918, p. 1.

42. *Daily Post & Record*, June 4, p. 1, June 11, p. 1, July 25, p. 5; *New York Times*, July 25, p. 12, July 26, p. 8—all 1918.

43. Here and below, *New York Times*, July 28, 1918, sec. 2, p. 5; *Daily Post & Record*, July 29, 1918, p. 5.

44. *Daily Post & Record*, July 30, 1918, p. 2, Nov. 2, 1918, p. 4, Nov. 19, 1923, p. 10; *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 5, 1973, p. C3.

45. *Daily Post & Record*, Aug. 7, 1918, p. 7, Dec. 30, 1918, p. 3. For his opponents, see www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/fulton-f.htm.

46. *Daily Post & Record*, Aug. 11, 1919, p. 8, Mar. 10, 1920, p. 8.

47. *Daily Post & Record*, Jan. 2, p. 4, Apr. 8, p. 8, May 10, p. 8, July 27, p. 3—all 1920; McCallum, *World Heavyweight Boxing Championship*, 87.

48. *Daily Post & Record*, May 27, 1920, p. 8, Feb. 4, 1921, p. 2, Aug. 10, 1922, p. 3. On boxers managed by Collins, see, for example, *Daily Post & Record*, Aug. 8, 1917, p. 5, Dec. 14, 1917, p. 1, Jan. 17, 1920, p. 8, Apr. 6, 1920, p. 8, July 15, 1920, p. 3, Nov. 11, 1923, p. 8.

49. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 49, 50 (quote), 55; McCallum, *World Heavyweight Boxing Championship*, 83, 87; *Daily Post & Record*, Sept. 9, p. 8, Nov. 1, p. 8, Nov. 4, p. 10—all 1921.

50. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 51–53; McCallum, *World Heavyweight Boxing Championship*, 91; Dempsey, *Dempsey*, 132–38, 175; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/dempsey.htm.

51. *Daily Post & Record*, May 13, 1921, p. 2.

52. *Daily Post & Record*, Nov. 12, 1921, p. 10.

53. *Daily Post & Record*, July 30, p. 8,

Sept. 2, p. 10, Sept. 9, p. 8, Nov. 1, p. 8, Nov. 4, p. 10, Nov. 12, p. 10—all 1921.

54. *Daily Post & Record*, May 13, 1921, p. 2, Jan. 14, 1922, p. 8.

55. *Daily Post & Record*, Aug. 10, 1922, p. 3, Aug. 26, 1922, p. 3; www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/miske-b.htm; *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 5, 1973, p. C3.

56. Dempsey, *Dempsey*, 180; *Daily Post & Record* Apr. 18, 1917, p. 5, May 13, 1921, p. 2. For examples of managers in action, see Dempsey, *Dempsey*, 43, 65, 185–86.

57. *Daily Post & Record*, Nov. 19, 1923, p. 8, Nov. 24, 1923, p. 10.

58. Here and two paragraphs below, *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 1924, p. 24, Nov. 27, 1924, p. 27, Jan. 31, 1925, p. 11; *Daily Post & Record*, Nov. 19, p. 8, Nov. 21, p. 10, Nov. 28, p. 8 (picture)—all 1924.

59. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 63, 70, 71; Dempsey, *Dempsey*, 105.

60. *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 5, 1973, p. C3.

61. *Rochester Post Bulletin*, Dec. 19, 1925, p. 9.

62. Norman Fulton telephone interview with author, June 5, 2001.

63. *Rochester Post Bulletin*, June 20, 1979, p. 40; Fulton interviews, Dec. 7, 2000, June 5, 2001; *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 5, 1973, p. C3.

64. *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 5, 1973, p. C3; *Minneapolis Star*, July 4, 1973, p. D3.

65. Nat Fleischer, *50 Years at Ringside* (New York: Fleet Publishing, 1958), 257; Dan Cuoco, International Boxing Research Organization, email to author, Apr. 23, 2004.

66. Durant, *Heavyweight Champions*, 62–63; Suster, *Champions of the Ring*, 77–78.

67. Dempsey, *Dempsey*, 94.

The photos on p. 74, 77, 80 (top), and 87 are courtesy the estate of Norman Fulton with thanks to Yvonne Rathman, Park Rapids, for making them available; p. 78 is from the Olmsted County Historical Society. All others are from Minnesota Historical Society collections.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).