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Shelby's Folly

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SHELBY'S FOLLY

JACK DEMPSEY, DOC KEARNS, AND THE SHAKEDOWN OF A MONTANA BOOMTOWN

JASON KELLY

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"A curious thing about boxing is that most matches, considered intrinsically, as athletic events, are interesting only to seasoned experts and fans. The crowd at large is concerned with the issues behind them, and with the flavor of the characters involved. Each big prizefight is a climax in a story, or series of stories, about people. . . . The fight game has a way of overlapping into many of the lively social arts of man—politics, drinking, litigation, the stage, the motion pictures, popular fiction, larceny, and propaganda. That side of it, the byplay, is what appeals most to me."

John Lardner, "White Hopes and Other Tigers"

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1. High Noon in Shelby

Dust kicked up around Shelby, Montana, at dawn on July 4, 1923, as thousands of people started venturing into the streets. From cots in overcrowded hotel lobbies, sleeping cars on railroad sidings, and campsites along the Marias River, boxing fans awakened to a holiday festival before the heavyweight championship fight between Jack Dempsey and Tommy Gibbons. Still more arrived by train and car, clogging the town that had hoped for many more free-spending tourists despite having no place to put them.

A livery stable had transformed itself into a makeshift lunch counter and hotel. Guests who could not secure a cot were forced to sleep on hay. Lines snaked for blocks outside proper restaurants. Souvenir vendors hawked trinkets. Green eye shades were popular items under the strong midsummer sun. Scalpers advertised their tickets, available at a fraction of face value, which was as high as $50. To one outsider reporting for the *New York Times*, the

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scene did not resemble a sporting capital so much as a "county seat during fair week." Bustling, but unimpressive.

All the essential services visitors lacked only emphasized the town's diminutive proportions. Oil, the source of the misplaced economic confidence that led to this heavyweight championship escapade, would not do Shelby any good today.

Local entrepreneurs did have the principle of supply and demand in their favor—at least while supplies lasted. "Food prices, which have been slowly climbing for the past several days, today cast modesty to the prairie winds and stood unashamed on the high cost of the living peak," the Associated Press reported. "Sandwiches even sold all the way from 25 to 50 cents. Steaks required large bankrolls and fresh eggs—well, there weren't any."

Thousands of tickets remained at the box office. Big crowds gathered at the gates, not to queue up for purchase, but to negotiate and agitate for lower prices. The promotion of the fight had been a financial disaster. Rather than establishing Shelby as "the Tulsa of the West," the ambition of the biggest dreamers, it cost the town a healthy percentage of its oil, ranching, and banking fortunes.

Cash-flow problems had left the fight itself in doubt for weeks. That uncertainty created a disastrous economic condition for the promoters—compound disinterest. Special trains from around the country were canceled as potential customers had second thoughts. The trains that did chug into town on July 4 ferried far fewer than the anticipated crush of fans.

"The San Francisco delegation, numbering four men, arrived early, the residue of 200, who had made reservations as soon as they heard the fight was on," the *New York Times* reported. "From Los Angeles came three instead of the expected seventy-five." That was an especially determined trio, though, considering that they came even without the fight tickets they had purchased in advance. "They were sent by mail and didn't arrive before the three customers left. So the fight fans of Los Angeles reached Shelby about the time the tickets reached Los Angeles."

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Plenty of locals had tickets to spare. From Shelby to Great Falls, about two hours to the south, citizens had stepped up months earlier to make the fight a reality. They bought blocks of tickets for thousands to help raise the earnest money necessary to make the financial whales of the boxing business take notice of tiny, anonymous Shelby.

Many were stuck with thousands in souvenir cardboard, struggling to unload their inventory at going-out-of-business prices. Johnny and Tip O'Neill of Great Falls subscribed for $20,000 worth, but they could spare it. After taking one each for themselves, they returned the rest to the box office for the promoters to dispense as they pleased. Others could not afford to be so generous with their investments-turned-donations and hustled to recoup some of the cost in an overcrowded marketplace.

Unofficial box offices sprouted up on Shelby sidewalks like so many lemonade stands. In that depressed market, a ticket did not cost much more than a soft drink. Those $50 ringside seats were going for $25 or less before noon. "One Shelby citizen, who had a block of five on his hands, sold them all for $50—$275 worth of paper," the *New York Times* reported.

"Shelby citizen" was the key phrase and the reason why the rising temperature in town included both emotional and meteorological conditions. People were hot. Broken promises turned this day of celebration into an embarrassment, if not worse. Town residents had done their civic duty to crank the fight's financial engine to life, and now they were left choking on the exhaust. "Most of these well-scalped scalpers were amateur, innocent local citizens," the *New York Times* reported, "who had subscribed for blocks of tickets to help put over the great fight that was to make Shelby famous around the world."

Like the salesmen at the arena gates, they hardly could give the tickets away. Even the few people to venture into the arena early did not appear to have paid retail. An unaccompanied twelve-year-old boy from Butte was the first person through the gates at

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10:30 a.m., with the stub of a ringside ticket, although he would not say where he got it or how much he paid.

Many people paid nothing, preferring to take their cars or hike up the high ridge overlooking the arena to watch from a long distance but for free. Flaherty Optic Parlor in Great Falls offered a product that could have helped their view from the hills. The "Biascope" was designed to do the work of "field glasses and binoculars of equal power at one-fifth their price." For $6, the Biascope even beat the deflated price of a ticket.

The ticket surplus created a standoff around the perimeter of the octagonal wooden arena. It was built in less than two months from pine that had to be shipped into treeless Shelby, creating suffocating construction costs that were among the burdens the promoters could not cover. That a stadium was erected at all served as a testament to their determination. But row upon row of empty seats inside, and the rowdy crowd jostling outside, symbolized the financial tug of war that defined the doomed promotion.

For most of the day, neither side budged at the box office. While that free-market duel continued, the sun beat down on the unoccupied expanse of pine boards inside, creating a surreal scene that the *Great Falls Tribune* described as "pathetic in emptiness."

There were a few thousand ticketholding fans inside, mostly clotted around the ring and scattered in the western sections of the arena. Away from the ring, and up the gradual incline of the octagon, only an occasional handful of fans could be seen, like weeds poking through sidewalk cracks.

Enough women attended to attract notice both for their mere presence and for the color of their neckerchiefs, which brightened an already shimmering afternoon. Between the tufts of bright yellow fluffed at the neck and green visors tugged low over many men's foreheads, the arena had an emerald and gold glint under the vast, unblemished blue of the Big Sky.

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Brush fires of restlessness broke out as the ring remained empty long after "the alleged start of the big show," but they were contained compared to the growing conflagration outside. The early arriving crowd seemed content to amuse itself. After the announcer paged a "Mr. Leonard Diehl," a cry followed from ringside, echoing around the empty seats. "Page Mr. Raw Deal!" Touché.

Anyone without a financial interest could afford to have fun at the expense of the suckers who staged this tragicomic production. Noting the presence of famed western artist Charlie Russell, the *New York Times* could not help itself: "As a painter of the great open spaces he had the chance of his life to get distance from the vacant benches."

The sparse collection of spectators waited about ninety minutes beyond the appointed time for the festivities and preliminary bouts to begin. Even with the gates open and tickets torn, doubt lingered that a heavyweight championship fight really would happen way out there in the middle of nowhere.

A dispute over payment delayed the second preliminary bout after the first began, an hour and a half behind schedule, and ended with a second-round knockout. Mike Collins, the matchmaker, and the promoters huddled with Dempsey's calculating, manipulative manager, Jack "Doc" Kearns, behind closed doors to discuss the only issue relevant to any of the participants in this failing promotion: Money. Missing money, to be more precise.

Shelby's unpopulated white pine elephant remained far in arrears to lumber and construction contractors, to say nothing of the money owed Kearns himself, who negotiated a $300,000 guarantee on Dempsey's behalf. Despite receiving only two-thirds of that contractual promise, he succumbed to pressure at the last moment and agreed to accept the balance in gate receipts. His prospects for payment in full did not look promising. Of course, had Kearns not taken such a hard line against the promoters,

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casting doubt over the fight for weeks, attendance (and his take) might have been better.

Plenty of time remained for late arrivals because pockets were still being turned inside out to scrounge up the spare change needed to pay the fighters on the undercard. Kearns, of all people, ultimately put up $1,000 to keep the proceedings moving. "If this fight was in such bad condition that it touched the charitable nerve of Jack Kearns," Elmer Davis wrote in the *New York Times*, "it was pretty far gone."

Through all the frustration, the crackle of electricity still could be felt. Several airplanes flew low over the arena in violation of restricted airspace. Photographers of both the still and the moving varieties jockeyed for position at ringside and on high towers built into the stands.

When the fighters for the first preliminary bout finally appeared, fidgety fans from the rampart sections streamed past the ushers—all military veterans, in uniform—to claim empty seats at ringside. A knockout early in the second round sated some of their bloodlust, but the boxers yielded the stage to an elaborate musical interlude between fights.

Two bands—one from the Elks Club, another from the Canadian highlands, complete with kilted bagpipers—could not hold their attention. Two soloists, including a blind soldier and fight manager named J. C. McMahon, generated appreciative applause, but the people who bothered to show up were there to see a fight, not a concert.

A contingent of about one hundred members of the region's native Blackfoot tribe filed into the arena and took their seats. They wore face paint and feathers and ceremonial dress, as if playing the complementary part to the local ranchers with their boots and six-shooters.

While the visiting crowd took in the entertainment and the local color, haggling continued backstage, where Kearns eventually surrendered the grand necessary to roust the fighters for the

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second preliminary. There would not be a third. The repeated delays forced the elimination of that portion of the program, the better to appease a crowd growing more agitated as the clock ticked toward two hours past the promised 2:00 p.m. bell for the main event.

All the haggling and tension inside had nothing on the toe-to-toe intensity outside. Combatants in this commercial scrap included, not just sellers and potential buyers, but the IRS itself, which could be almost as persuasive as Kearns in accumulating its cut of the box office receipts. Still, Charles Rasmussen, a federal collector of internal revenue, would need at least the staff of twenty accompanying him to do that.

Kearns, in effect the proprietor of this mom-and-pop shop for the day, spent plenty of time before the fight overseeing sales, such as they were. As practical as he was cunning, Kearns did the cost-benefit analysis in his head and instructed the sellers to reduce the general admission price from $22 to $10. When that did not move enough tickets, he dropped the price again, to $8.

First cash, then gate-crashers passed through the wire fence around the arena. Between the legitimate, cut-rate transactions and the scofflaws who squirmed through for free, attendance increased by only a few hundred. To stem the flow of freeloaders, Rasmussen shut off ticket sales and ordered all the gates closed.

That left a stadium built for forty thousand with "but a few thousand souls pocketed within its huge maw when the heavy champion of the world and his challenger came down to fight."

Jack Dempsey ducked between the ropes wearing white silk trunks strung with a red, white, and blue belt and a thick, wool rollneck cardigan sweater. A retinue of handlers surrounded him, and photographers climbed into the ring, clamoring for a shot of the champ.

Dempsey looked like a star, tall, muscular, and tanned with his close-cropped, jet-black hair slicked back. The rough edges of

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his mining-town background were polished to a rugged, cowboy-movie quality after four years as the heavyweight champion. That aura of celebrity seduced spectators, otherwise inclined to distrust him as a draft dodger and a pirate of their personal fortunes, to give him a boisterous reception. They were in the presence of greatness and expressed respectful appreciation. If nothing else, they wanted to say thanks for coming all this way—even if they provided the train fare and then some.

Their applause soon reverted to the restless spirit that had pervaded the town for weeks. "Dynamite was in the air," Charles Samuels wrote. "As Dempsey sat down in his corner he was greeted by a shower of pop bottles. Everywhere he looked, men in the crowd seemed to be waving six-shooters at him."

There was real concern, probably unfounded but still unsettling to Dempsey and his handlers, that those men might just cock and fire their guns in his general direction. Local law enforcement officials were reported to have required people to empty their holsters before entering the arena, but order, let alone law, did not prevail at the gates.

Nerves were frayed to such a heightened sensitivity that a holiday firecracker exploding in the arena sent shock waves of fear through the crowd. "It had the effect of a six-gun outburst," Bill Corum wrote. "The reaction was sensational and, for one ghastly instant, panic threatened among the seven thousand cash customers."

Almost ten minutes passed before the challenger, Tommy Gibbons, appeared. In dark trunks and a worn robe with an elaborate, fading patterned design, he emerged to an ovation that far surpassed the decibels produced for Dempsey. Appreciation for the champion did not compare to an underdog kinship with the challenger. Citizens of Shelby, Blackfeet Indians from the surrounding territory, paying customers from out of town, everybody considered Gibbons one of them.

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Much like Shelby itself, Gibbons accepted this fight on spec. Aside from training expenses, daily admission charges at his camp, and a cut of the film rights, he received no compensation. His respected and accomplished career had not attracted much notice outside boxing circles, creating a sense of him as a fortunate participant in this spectacle.

Living and training in Shelby—unlike Dempsey, who set up camp a couple of hours away in Great Falls—further established Gibbons as the favorite of the hometown fans. As the financial strain of hosting the fight threatened to drown the town, local citizens identified more and more with Gibbons. Blackfeet Indians held a ceremony in his honor a few days before the fight, anointing him "Thunder Chief." They all seemed to be in a quixotic quest against Dempsey together.

With the main event teetering on the verge of economic collapse since the signing of the contract two months earlier, the community rallied against Dempsey. It was his manager, Doc Kearns, who kept the entire enterprise in doubt with repeated demands for his full $300,000 guarantee, even as debt inundated the promoters. Frequent reports of potential cancellation, which Kearns fanned with his public posturing, served only to drive down attendance and ramp up public anger toward the champion.

Not until 2:45 a.m. on July 3 did Kearns agree to forsake his final $100,000 installment, assuming control of gate receipts to pay the bill. The *Great Falls Tribune* reported this as an act of gracious largesse, saying, without apparent sarcasm, that Kearns had made Dempsey "the best sportsman in the history of boxing." Up in Shelby, where the townspeople knew Kearns had $200,000 of their money already in the bank, they had a different opinion of Dempsey's flamboyant, pastel-clad manager, known in the newspapers as "Dapper Jack." They transferred that feeling to the champ, creating a sense of static electricity in the baking cauldron of Shelby's wooden stadium.

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While Dempsey sat waiting in his corner, a member of his entourage held an umbrella over him to keep the beating sun off his back. Kearns laced the boxing gloves over Dempsey's taped hands. Two years of rust and two months of performing in the center ring of this Wild West circus made him anxious to the point of hyperactivity for the bell to ring.

Gibbons noticed the champion's dark tan from training outdoors and his twitchy impatience that rivaled the crowd's lust to start the fight. "Burned almost black by the sun, Dempsey shuffled restlessly in his corner, eyes narrowed and glittering," Gibbons said. "He could hardly hold still as Jack Kearns laced on the six-ounce fighting mitts."

Gibbons had a detailed plan to leave the ring as the new heavyweight champion of the world, a strategy that reflected his studious approach to the sport. He considered himself "the better boxer" of the two and envisioned a scenario that sounded simple enough in theory—bobbing, weaving, ducking, shuffling, parrying, and just generally keeping his distance. Forcing Dempsey to swing and miss, wearing himself out in the process. Then the challenger's footwork and fitness would win a battle of attrition with the champion. Simple enough. In theory.

In the ring now with Dempsey, the man with the calculated plan encountered doubt. From his corner, Gibbons watched as Dempsey, facing away from him, grabbed the ropes and pulled them like oars to loosen his shoulders and back. His bulging muscles flexed, and Gibbons swallowed hard, never more aware of the menace that pure, raw power presented to his clinical, detailed defense. At that imposing sight, Gibbons's mind wandered away from the ring, away from the opportunity ahead of him, to previous Dempsey thunderstorms he had watched as a spectator and the thought of another one threatening him.

The first violent storm roared through Toledo, Ohio, four years earlier. That was the day "the air turned red," as John Lardner put it, describing the squall that bloodied and buckled heavyweight

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champion Jess Willard. A lumbering but powerful fighter—the promoter Tex Rickard urged him, in all earnestness, not to kill Dempsey—Willard could not stand up to Dempsey's relentless assault. Never finding the support or protection he sought from the ropes, Willard went down with a thud seven times in the first round alone.

Rumors surfaced many years later that Kearns had laced Dempsey's gloves with plaster of paris, but the evidence has never supported the yarn that the manager himself first spun. All Gibbons knew in 1923 was that he had witnessed Dempsey tenderizing a titanic champion, forcibly removing the belt he still held.

Dempsey's most recent title defense came two years earlier against Georges Carpentier, the French light heavyweight. There were fleeting glimpses of what a smaller tactician could do to defend against Dempsey, and Gibbons took note from the stands, but the result was the same. Not even four rounds into the bout, after all of eleven minutes, Carpentier was splayed on the canvas for the second and final time. These were unwelcome but inevitable visions as the climactic moment of his career approached. "I'd seen what he'd done to Willard, to Carpentier, with his murderous punching," Gibbons said. "A single slip and I, too, might be groveling in the blood and resin as they had."

His disturbing reverie did not last. As mental smelling salts, he drew on the memories of his own experiences in the ring to snap out of it. Whatever temporary interference his imagination caused, in his heart Gibbons believed that he could do more than dance with Dempsey.

Gibbons did not fit the physical profile of either Willard or Carpentier. If anything, he represented a hybrid—skillful like Carpentier but bigger, quicker and more fit than Willard but powerful enough to punch his way out of trouble. And, as a student of Dempsey's tactics in particular and boxing in general, Gibbons believed that he had a mental advantage. Mixed together,

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it made for a potent emotional cocktail, the confidence of rigorous and meticulous preparation easing the menacing sensation of standing across from Dempsey.

Dozens of knockout victories convinced Gibbons that he could slug with the champion when necessary. Considering the man they called "the Manassa Mauler" would need only one punch, properly applied, to knock strategy clear across the Canadian border, Gibbons tried to summon the poise and patience to execute his plan. With a title shot in his sights, those previous Dempsey fights served as more than harbingers of a hard fall to the canvas burrowing into his psyche. They were scouting missions. "I'd studied Jack, analyzed his style," Gibbons said, "worked out a block or counter for everything I'd seen him do."

Again, his mind wandered. This time Gibbons traveled back seven years to a fight between his brother, Mike Gibbons, and Jack Dillon. Always tuned in to the nuances, Tommy noticed that his deft, deceptive brother didn't just make Dillon miss. He made him miss by the whisker of a five o'clock shadow, sparing himself the blow, and positioning himself to return fire in the next instant. "That fight had been a revelation to me," Tommy Gibbons said. Now all he had to do was replicate it against the most feared fighter of his time.

Pale by comparison to the bronzed champion, Gibbons felt primed for this opportunity. In physical condition that belied his thirty-two years, but with the seasoning only his extensive experience could provide, he steeled himself. His trainer, Eddie Kane, gave him the kind of idle instruction intended to dull the nerves, focus the mind, and pass the time.

"Box him, Tommy. Make him miss. Lots of time."

An oppressive sun baked the canvas and made the pine bleachers sticky with sap. From the anxious corners of the ring to the rows of restless spectators, heat radiated around the arena—in temperature and temperament. People already inside wanted their money's worth. The aggressive crowd outside wanted cut

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rates or open gates. Gibbons wanted his chance to show the gamblers who put the odds as much as five-to-one against him that he could win. Dempsey, like a bull bucking in a pen, looked like he just wanted to be turned loose.

Kane kept talking in the challenger's ear, narrating the scene in the opposite corner that Gibbons watched with such a keen interest.

"Watch him. He'll come out fast."

Gibbons acknowledged the advice with a nod, but it might as well have been a voice in his head talking. He knew what he had to do.

At last, the referee, Jim Dougherty, summoned the boxers to the center of the ring for instructions. "Jack's black eyes bored into mine," Gibbons said, but the champion's words were high-pitched and disarming.

"How are you, Tommy?"

"Okay, Jack."

After only a few words, Dougherty sent them back to their corners and tugged his tweed cap down on his forehead to keep the sun out of his eyes.

One final reminder from Kane as he ducked outside the ropes—"That left hook, watch it"—was the last thing Gibbons heard before the clang from ringside that jangled nerves for miles around. Shelby's civic clock struck high noon at 3:58 p.m. When the bell rang, the publicity stunt that spun out of control became a reality.

Champion and challenger moved toward each other again, this time dispensing with the pleasantries. Their determined tenacity now reflected the raucous, edgy scene all around them. Gibbons heard the whoops of his adopted Blackfeet brethren and the sound of Dempsey's feet skittering across the canvas toward him. As the fighters converged and touched gloves at the center of the ring, fans pressed toward the gates around the perimeter of the arena. Two tense standoffs months in the making were about to be settled.

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