

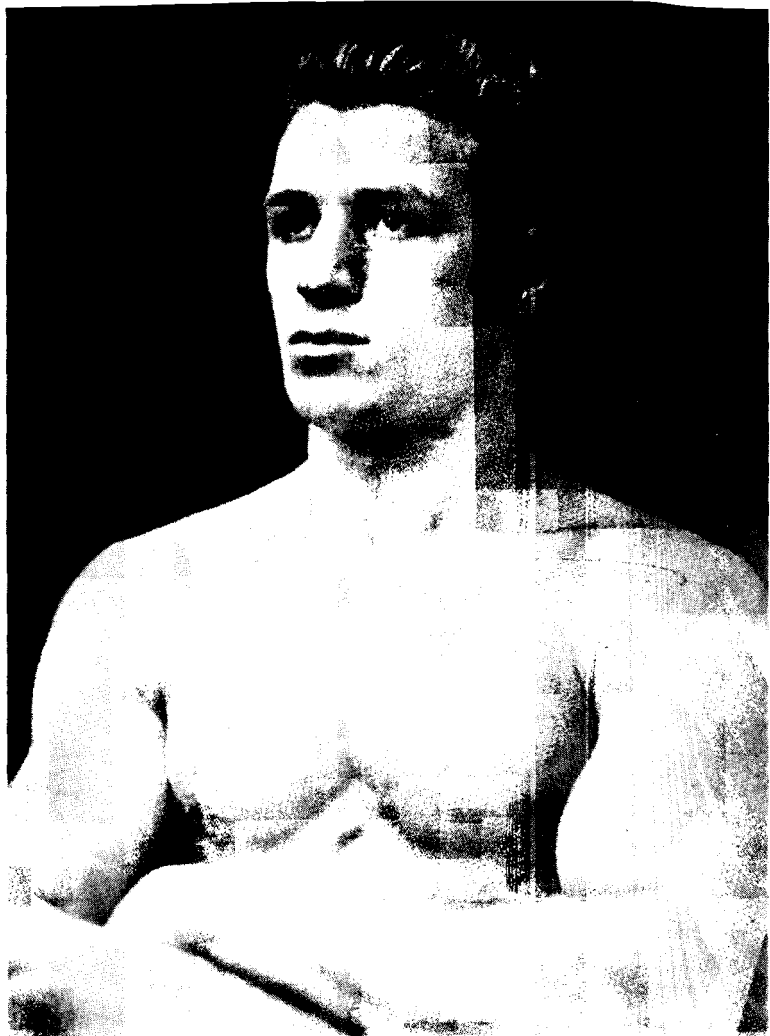


World's Famous Pugilists Box at the Fulton Opera House

by Johnny Hauck

Some time ago my friend, Jack Loose, teacher, historian, and editor of the *Journal*, asked me to write a story about some of the famous great pugilists who boxed at the Fulton Opera House. The story of the opera house and how it grew out of Christopher Hager's Fulton Hall of 1852 has been told before in these pages. The history of the "Grand Old Lady" of Prince Street usually concerns the plays, concerts, operas, recitals, and lectures that appeared on its stage. What most persons of the younger generations do not know is that world-famous boxers appeared on that historic stage also. I hope my story will add that missing part to the history of the Fulton Opera House.

One such pugilist was Joseph Choynski, a most remarkable man, indeed. Boxing was outlawed in many states which caused promoters to stage fights in places where they thought the law could not reach. Joe Choynski and James J. Corbett (who later won the World Heavyweight Championship from John L. Sullivan) grew up in San Francisco. As boys they started to box about the same time, and became bitter rivals. Several times the police were called to stop the fighting between them. Corbett and Choynski wanted to settle the matter between them, and some one thought of staging a "fight to the finish" without getting into the heads of the law.



Joe Choynski as he looked in his prime.

Where they could hold such a contest was the big problem. It was solved when the decision was made to hold the fight on a barge beyond the reach of the law. A very wealthy friend and backer of Corbett, Tom Williams, owned a barge used to haul grain to San Francisco. He agreed to supply the barge for the fight. On June 5, 1889 the barge left San Francisco at 2:00 a.m., and arrived at Benicia Bay shortly before 7:00 a.m. Several hundred boxing fans piled on the barge to see the



One of the great sports events of the Bay Area in the past century, and a classic in United States ring history—the Benicia barge fight between Jim Corbett and Joe Choynski—is depicted by an artist of the time on an old copper-plate etching.

**From the San Francisco Call - Bulletin, Centennial
1885 - 1955.**

fight. Small fishing boats also carried parties of fans to the site. The trip itself was not uneventful, for several of the small boats were upset. Although some of the fans took an unexpected dunking, all were saved.

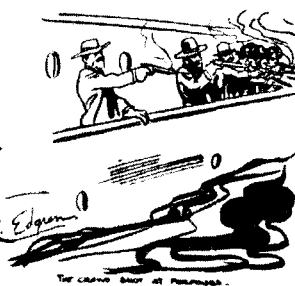
The referee was Patsy Hogan. The fight proved to be very savage, with an exhausted Corbett winning in the 27th round, and Choynski collapsing at the end. Corbett would never fight Choynski again. Corbett weighed 175 pounds after the fight, and Choynski weighed 155 pounds. Corbett went on to win the World Heavyweight Championship, as mentioned earlier, from John L. Sullivan. Both Corbett and Sullivan boxed at the Fulton Opera House at different times.

After his fight with Corbett, Choynski became one of the world's most famous pugilists. He was a fine boxer and a terrific puncher. Although he never weighed more than 170 pounds, he fought and defeated some of the all-time great heavyweight fighters in the history of boxing. Truly, he was a remarkable man.

I had the pleasure of meeting Joe Choynski a few years before he passed away. As a boy I studied all about boxing, and collected everything on that sport and the old pugilists that I could get my hands on. That was the beginning of a life-long hobby and collection. Those many cartons and files of records, scrapbooks, photographs, and other boxing memorabilia are now in the archives of the Lancaster County Historical Society. If the Houck Collection continues to inspire and encourage the youth of the future to love and practice good sportsmanship, and to

CORBETT WINNING ONE OF THE GREATEST FIGHTS ON RECORD

THE FIGHT, 1874, IN THE FINE PICTURE BY



THE GREAT BLOW AT PHOENIX.

make the best use of the body God gives us, my years of collecting will be reward enough, and I will be thankful.

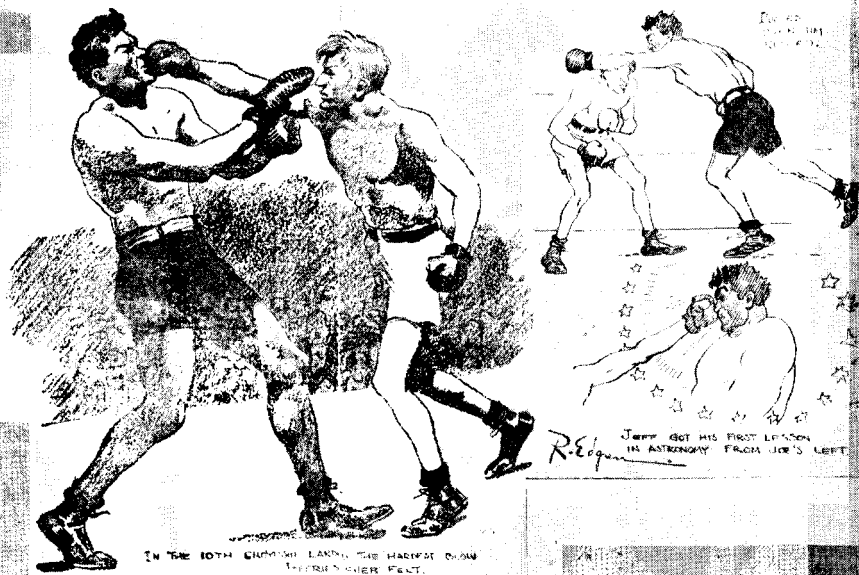
Joe Choynski became one of my ring idols, so when I met him in later life, I talked to him about some of his fights (held long before my time). He looked at me with a puzzled expression and asked my age. When I told him, he could not understand how fluently I could talk about these old-timers. The admiration I had for him soon was reciprocated, and we became good friends and we corresponded regularly until he passed away at Cincinnati, Ohio, January 25, 1943.

Among Choynski's unbelievable exploits as a pugilist was to fight a 20-round show with Jim Jeffries at San Francisco on November 30, 1887. At this time Joe weighed his maximum of 170 pounds, and Jeffries weighed 220 pounds. Choynski had been boxing eight years. For Jeffries this was only his seventh fight. His first bout against Hank Griffin occurred when Jeffries was 18 years old. Griffin, an experienced 20-round fighter who had fought some of the best in his day, was to engage Jeffries in a 20-round fight at Los Angeles. For the first ten rounds the older pugilist gave Jeffries a "boxing lesson." After that, Jeffries told his seconds he was going to knock Griffin out because he could feel Griffin's punches were getting weaker. In round 14 Jeffries recorded a knockout over the famed veteran fighter---quite an accomplishment for an 18-year old in his first fight which was to last the usual 20 rounds. Six fights later Jim Jeffries knocked out Bob Fitzsimmons to win the World Heavyweight Championship. When Joe Choynski fought Jeffries, he had 46 fights against some of the old-time greats of boxing. Jeffries said after the fight, and years later, that Choynski hit him the hardest blow he ever felt.

Jeffries won the championship in his 13th fight. To me Jim Jeffries was the greatest of all the Heavyweight Champions. On Sep-

tember 7, 1904, Jim Jeffries issued the most remarkable challenge ever made by a champion. Jeffries said he would take on three, separately, of the best challengers in the world in the same ring the same night in three bouts for ten rounds each. If he did not defeat them within a space of thirty rounds he would vacate the Championship, and retire from the ring, taking the loser's end. The vacated crown would then pass to one of the victorious trio by process of elimination. *No one ever accepted his offer!*

HOW JOE CHOYNSKI ALMOST REACHED THE TOP



This fight ended in a 20 round draw at San Francisco, California, Nov. 30, 1897.

Returning to Joe Choynski, that hardest of all punchers, he further distinguished himself in 1899 by knocking out Jack Johnson at Galveston, Texas, in three rounds. This was an outlawed fight, so both were arrested and jailed, and while in prison became good friends. Joe gave Johnson boxing lessons he never forgot. Johnson later won the Heavyweight Championship from Tommy Burr in Australia.

I also had the pleasure of meeting Jack Johnson. What a fine man he proved to be! Jack Johnson boxed in Lancaster for the late Harry H. Hensel at his Lancaster Athletic Club (the old Maennerchor Hall) on North Prince Street. Johnson won from Jim Jeffords in a six-round bout.

Choynski also fought big Marvin Hart to a draw. Hart later won a 20-round bout from Jack Johnson, and he won the Heavyweight crown from Jack Root, scoring a knockout in 12 rounds. Another big win for

Choynski was a knockout scored over Bobby Woods in the 34th round at San Francisco. This was a fight to the finish.

Tom Lewis, the Pittsburgh sportswriter, wrote in part about Joe Choynski,

"The amazing blond Joe Choynski was born to be a scholar; instead, he developed into such a mighty son of sock that he was double poison to most behemoths and a triple threat to nearly all champions he fought---and he fought them all---Jim Corbett, Jim Jeffries, Tom Sharkey, Kid McCoy, Peter Maher, Gus Ruhlin, and Philadelphia's Jack O'Brien, and a long list of others.

"How did Choynski get away with all this? He knocked out the shifty Jack Johnson, he hit Bob Fitzsimmons so hard that Bob fell like a log, he hammered Tom Sharkey until he was shaken from head to foot.

"He fought the dazzling Jim Corbett to a standstill before Choynski himself fell, and he held Jim Jeffries to a draw."

How did he do it? It was practice plus natural endowment. A man has to be born with something and I guess I had a little of it. I developed what I had, and then some more!

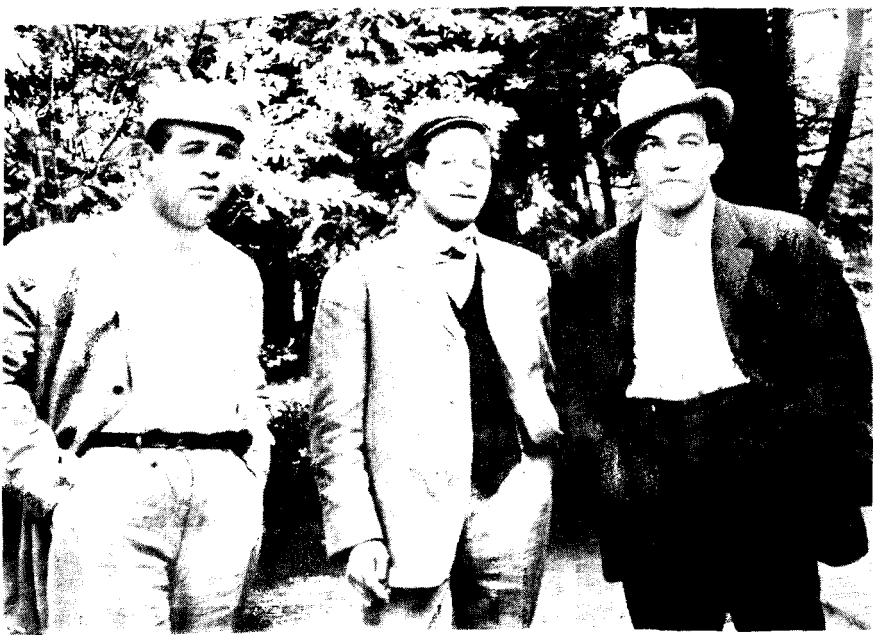
The more research I do on Joe Choynski the greater I find him to be. On November 27, 1893, Choynski boxed the Australian Peter Jackson in an exhibition at the Fulton Opera House. What a treat he was to see! Jackson was called "Black Prince Peter," and "Peter the Great." He was truly an uncrowned champion.

Local fans of the ring were in for an exciting evening at the Fulton as the two ring artists exhibited professional skill.

The late Doctor Newton E. Bitzer told me that when he was a boy his dad took him to see the Mighty John L. Sullivan box at the Fulton Opera House. Dr. Bitzer never forgot that experience. Dr. Bitzer, a well-known Lancaster physician, examined the pugilists at all the Lancaster boxing shows for years. Everyone in the Lancaster World of Boxing knew this fine man.

Champion John L. Sullivan was called the "Mighty One." They had a good reason to call him that, for he held the championship title for 12 years. During that time he offered \$1,000 to anyone who would last four rounds with him. The "Mighty One" blasted out over 100 challengers in less than four rounds. Sullivan was in our town to box an exhibition when Dr. Bitzer's dad took him to see the Champion. Dr. Bitzer said he and his father had seats near the stage with an excellent view of the ring. When John L. Sullivan appeared, the youthful Bitzer could not believe what he saw, so powerfully built was the "Mighty One."

Herbert Slade (The Maori) of Australia was the man who boxed Sullivan that evening at the Fulton. On August 6, 1883, Sullivan knocked out Slade in two rounds at the old Madison Square Garden in New York. After that fight, Sullivan hired Slade as a sparring partner in their exhibition matches. During the bout on the Fulton stage, everything was going along fine until Slade hit the champion a hard punch on



Three ring greats from the past. L. to R. Sam Berger, the National Amateur Heavyweight Boxing Champion, Joe Choynski, and James J. Jeffries, the King of all the Heavyweight Champions. This photo was taken at Jeffries training camp in 1910 when he was training to fight Jack Johnson after being out of the ring for six years.

the jaw. With fire in his eyes, Sullivan retaliated with his own right, sending Slade over the top rope and against the wall, from which Slade rebounded and rolled down the stairway to the basement! Slade recovered and returned to the ring without further harm. Dr. Bitzer never forgot that sight!

Some of my scrapbooks are filled with appearances of famous boxers at the historic Fulton Opera House, and I will write more of them for this series.

Johnny Houck

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Johnny Houck, a stalwart son of Lancaster city's 8th Ward, grew up in the shadow of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, where love and obedience to one's parents and church were the foundations upon which good lives were built. Johnny exemplifies this rearing to a high degree. Johnny's brother, Leo, was a Middleweight Champion, and served for many years as a coach at the Pennsylvania State University. Brother Leo, now enshrined in the Sports Hall of Fame, demonstrated those same qualities for which Johnny has been recognized---surely a tribute to their parents. The four Houck sons--Edward, Leo, Frank, and Johnny--were all athletes; Ed starred in baseball, and the others were boxers. Johnny coached boxing at St. Joseph's Catholic Athletic Club for approximately ten years during which time he taught Johnny Rampulla, Johnny Steinbaecker, Jack Green (Greenawalt), Johnny Scheid, "Skeets" Reinfried, Eddie Kirchner, Paul Rice, Vick Moon, Joseph Danz, Freddy and Ray Kirchner, Homer Garlin, and Louie Scheuzen-zuber. He boxed professionally, and played football, before going to work for the Armstrong Cork Company. When he retired from that company in 1963, after 40 years, he was known and respected from the late H. W. Prentis, Jr., former president, down to the men in the yard. Since retiring he has received many honors, citations, and recognition awards from national, state and local organizations. From the Commonwealth of Massachusetts he was awarded the Paul Revere Patriot citation, and in February 1975 Hauck was presented with the coveted George Kirchner Memorial Award by the Lancaster Sports-writers and Broadcasters Association. Along with the large metal plaque Hauck received a Hamilton wristwatch and a portrait of himself.