

Norman Shelby was the Real McCoy

By Ray Elliott

He was the original Kid McCoy. Sportswriters at the turn of the 19th century called him the real McCoy to distinguish him from the phony ones who later took the name. Perhaps that's where the phrase "the real McCoy" originated.

I had heard people use the phrase for somebody they considered authentic. I had heard of Kid McCoy, the boxer. But I didn't know anything about him.

Then I came across some old newspaper clippings about his death. And I found he was probably born in either Willow Hill or in North Muddy Township in Jasper County (Illinois) in 1874. If not, he was born shortly after his parents moved from there to Columbus, Indiana.

His real name, I found out, was Norman Shelby. He ran away from his father's farm at the age of 13. In fights with freight train brakemen and in barroom brawls, he perfected his famous "corkscrew punch," a tremendous left hook.

Somewhere along the line, he decided to call himself Kid McCoy and become a boxer. Fight records were sketchy then. But according to his obituary in Time magazine, he defeated Tommy Ryan, the welterweight champion of the world, in 1896.

The World Almanac, published by the Chicago Tribune, lists him as welterweight champion in 1896 before he outgrew the division. Frank G. Menke, author of The Encyclopedia of Sports, doesn't mention that fact. He does say that McCoy, Ryan, "Philadelphia" Jack O'Brien and a few others claimed the middleweight title in 1897.

Although McCoy met Ryan as a welterweight, Menke says none of those claiming the middleweight title ever met at the then 158-pound limit of that division. It was 1908 before there was a recognized champion, but Menke does believe that Ryan was "looked upon by many as having the best claim to the title."

The claim was based on the fact that Ryan had graduated from the welterweight class in 1897 as champion. Nothing is mentioned about Ryan's loss to McCoy. Whatever is correct, Nat Fleischer, former editor of The Ring magazine and acknowledged boxing authority, compiled a list, ranking the all-time world fighters.

That list is in the 1959 edition of Fleischer's Ring Record and Boxing Encyclopedia. He ranked Kid McCoy as the No. 1 all-time light-heavyweight.

In 105 fights all over the world, McCoy's record was 81 wins, 6 losses, 9 draws and 9 no decisions. He knocked out 35 opponents and was knocked out four times himself. But he fought all comers. Among them were Tom Sharkey, Peter Maher, Joe Choynski and Herr Placke, all heavyweights. And he fought them while he was still a middleweight.

The Ring magazine established the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1954. Located in The Ring Museum at Madison Square Garden in New York City, annual selections are made in three groups: Pioneer, Old-Timers and Modern. The first three heavyweights above that McCoy fought are members of the Old-Timers' group. McCoy is a member as a welterweight. Ryan is a member as a middleweight. Jack Root, who outpointed McCoy in a 10-round fight on April 22, 1903, in Detroit to claim the light-heavyweight title is a member as a light-heavyweight.

By today's standards, the colorful McCoy could have undoubtedly been kicked out of boxing for his thrown fights and deception in the ring. He once threw carpet tacks into the ring when he was fighting a barefoot opponent in South Africa. But he was a boxing legend in his time.

After leaving the ring, he continued his colorful ways which had included champagne suppers at Delmonico's and a long list of wives and lovers. He was married 10 times, four times to the same woman. And perhaps he would have made it a few more had he not shot the one he said he "loved as I never loved a woman before." That was in Los Angeles on Aug. 12, 1924, and he shot three more people before the cops got him. He was reported to have been angry because the woman was going to leave him.

In 1925 McCoy was found guilty and sentenced to San Quentin. Seven years later he was paroled. He had met Harry Bennet at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in 1917 where Bennet was training for the light-heavyweight championship of the Navy.

McCoy offered advice to help Bennet win the championship. And he did win it. When Bennet later became personnel director of Ford Motor Company and McCoy was paroled, he went to work for Ford as a guard.

For the next eight years of his life, McCoy worked for Ford, attended local fights and most championship bouts around the country. He married for the 10th and final time and settled down under his real name.

Finally on April 18, 1940, he went to a Detroit hotel to get rid of his insomnia. He wrote a note to the youth of America. "Keep your bodies clean," he told them. "Be always in condition for any emergency."

In another note addressed "To whom it may concern," he said he was no longer "able to endure this world's madness any longer." Then he took an overdose of sleeping pills and didn't answer the bell the next morning.

He was dead at 66. But he left a legacy, Norman Shelby did. He was the real McCoy.