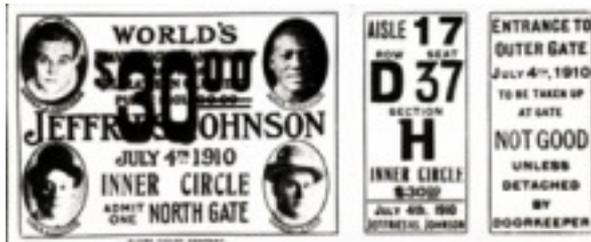


by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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On July 4, 1910, Reno staged perhaps the most controversial boxing contest in American history. The outspoken, reigning heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, the first African-American to hold the prized crown, overwhelmed his opponent Jim Jefferies, an undefeated heavyweight champion who had been coaxed out of retirement and dubbed “The Great White Hope.” Ken Burns’ PBS production, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (2005) poignantly captured the drama and pathos associated with the epic pugilistic contest.

The bout, among the major events in Reno’s history, and one which attracted more than twenty thousand spectators and some thirty thousand visitors—more people than all the residents of Washoe County at the time--was promoted as the “Fight of the Century.” The racial overtones associated with the fifteen-round battle captivated the nation and the world. White rioting broke out around the country after the fight and following the distribution of the fight film. As a result of the bloody carnage and tragic loss of life, Congress prohibited the interstate transport and showing of boxing films for some twenty-five years.

On July 4, 1979, the Washoe County Historical Society and the Nevada Corral of the Westerners International dedicated a historical marker commemorating the Johnson-Jefferies fight on the southeast corner of Toano and East Fourth streets. However, the exact location of the arena site, obscured with the passage of time and the growth of Reno, had been difficult to find. Old-timers knew it was out East Fourth Street, somewhere between Spokane and Sage streets, yet nobody knew for sure just where. A dedicated group of historians and history buffs decided in January 1979 that it was high time to solve the mystery.

The history detectives included UNR history professor Michael Brodhead, Richard Datin, Phil Earl, Eric Moody, Walt Mulcahy, Bob Nysten, and myself. The first thing we discovered was that

the newspapers of the day assumed everybody knew where the boxing arena was located. It was about a mile east of town, “at the turn of the road to Sparks where the trolley car leaves it,” and “just this side of Jack Vera’s, on the bend of the road to Sparks.” We determined that the site was on the block bounded by East Fourth, Toano, and Montello streets, and the railroad tracks. County tax records disclosed that this entire block belonged to prominent businessman Patrick Flanigan, and that it was the only parcel of land in the area large enough to accommodate the arena.

Photos of the boxing arena not only showed that the arena was south of the streetcar line on Fourth Street, and north of the Southern Pacific railroad tracks, but depicted, adjacent to the arena, structures whose identification helped substantially pinpoint the location of the fight. It was also discovered that Jack Vera’s Del Monte roadhouse stood near the old Sparks Road—also known as the Asylum Road--about a half block east of Montello Street.

We were very close to the exact location and probably would have settled for identifying the block in which the area was situated. However, we found the smoking gun while trying to determine when the arena was dismantled. The Reno Athletic Association which commissioned the arena’s construction had failed to pay the contractor, Charles Friedhoff. In turn, Friedhoff’s attorneys filed suit in the Washoe County district court and also filed a lien on the arena and Flanigan’s land.

On October 26, 1910, following a settlement, the suit was dropped and Friedhoff acquired the arena, but not Flanigan’s land. In the court documents was a legal description of the land in the Morrill-Smith Addition, identifying Block 7 and all the lots where the arena stood. Friedhoff began tearing down the arena, selling the lumber and anything else that could be salvaged to cover his costs. The *Reno Evening Gazette* of October 27 reported that “soon there will be nothing left to mark the site of this famous arena in which champion Johnson whipped the once famous J. J. Jefferies and demonstrated the fact that Jefferies couldn’t come back.”

Today, thanks to a cadre of history detectives, there is now a marker to designate the site where, for a time in 1910, much of the world’s attention was focused on two boxers, one black and one white, who represented much more than themselves in a perceived test of racial superiority.

Photo of the Johnson-Jefferies ticket stub courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal*; and the *Sierra Sage* ,  
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