

YONKERS HISTORY

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Michael Joseph Hogan, "Yonkers Favorite"

by Eddie Cantwell

That the Irish formed Yonkers' second largest immigrant population is well known. What is less well-known is that the roots of a huge number of the Irish who came to Yonkers, from the time of the Great Hunger of 1845-51 to the present day, are in the western County Waterford area known as The Decies. Among them are some of Yonkers' most prominent names: Flynn (both Senator John E. and our frequent contributor Tom), Hoar, McCrudden, Christopher, French, Galvin, Carey, Boyle, Moore, Wynne, and others. One of those Decies immigrants was Michael Joseph Hogan, who, under the alias of "Seamus O'Brien," was famous as one of the finest boxers in the U.S. early in the last century. The Museum in Dungarvan, county seat of Waterford and the main town of The Decies, recently published his story, written by Eddie Cantwell, a Dungarvan resident. We are grateful to Mr. Cantwell and to the Dungarvan Museum for permission to pass on this new-found piece of Yonkers history.

Among the most famous boxers of the early 20th Century was Shamus O'Brien, hailed as "Yonkers' Favorite."

The name was an alias. He was in fact Michael Joseph Hogan, born in 1891 at Ballinacourty, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford. He was one of five children born to Michael Hogan and Ellen Meade. The Hogan family lived in a picturesque thatched cottage, which stood close to the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. It was here that Michael Joseph Hogan spent the first 15 years of his life. Today the area is known as "The gold coast." In Hogan's day it was known as Wise's Point or simply "The Point." Michael was just 15 when he emigrated from his homeland in 1906. It was to be the first step along a road that would make him a household name in boxing circles, not only in the city of his adoption, but in the many states where he fought throughout his boxing career. Hogan's life story could well be scripted for a film; indeed, his career bears quite a remarkable resemblance to some of the more popular boxing films of recent years.

After just four years in the New World, the rugged and good-looking Hogan took those first steps that would earn him the title "Yonkers favorite" and guarantee him a place in the boxing history books.

Much of his early fighting was of the bare-knuckle kind; it was a popular but deadly sport of the period and certainly not for the faint hearted. He embraced the lifestyle of the time, and would hang around the street corners with his friends after work, and no doubt participated as a spectator at those secret-boxing venues.

It was said of him, that he was "scrapping all the time." Many of his bouts were not recorded in those early days; they were held at various venues and in an atmosphere of tense expectation and excitement. Money was lost and fortunes made on the backs of combatants who fought until only one was left standing. Many of Hogan's fights were fought at the Raven Athletics Club in New York City, where he did his training. He was approached after one such contest and invited to put his fists to better use. It is probable that he would have been contemplating such a move anyway and a little advice from the proper source was all that was needed to push the Ballinacourty man in the right direction.

Along the way, Michael met the beautiful Adelaide Searlis and they were married at St. Joseph's Church Yonkers on August 21 1910. Supported by his newly acquired wife he made his first serious commitment to boxing at the notorious Sing Sing prison. A boxing exhibition was organized and staged at the infamous venue. Hogan volunteered his services, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Life for the Hogans was no bed of roses. Fate delivered a crippling blow to the young couple when their young twin children Adelaide and Gilbert were snatched away during a chilling flu epidemic. Further down the road more heartache awaited the Hogans. Their 19-year-old son William Francis died in action during W.W. II. The young seaman's vessel, the ill-fated U.S.S. Gregory, came under fire from Japanese destroyers during the invasion of Guadalcanal. Though outnumbered, the Americans fought on to the bitter end. When the order was given to abandon the sinking ship, William Francis Hogan was already among the casualties. Today his name can be found engraved on three monuments: One in Getty Square, Yonkers, the second at Fort McKinley in the Philippines, and a third erected on the coast of the Solomon Islands.

Many tributes were paid to the remarkable fighter after his death. The Yonkers Herald Statesman carried a tribute blazoned with the banner: "Shamus O'Brien is dead after 400 bout career." The report went on to say, "Fighting several years in the old Irish section of Manhattan's Harlem, the 135-pounder's durability, strength and ruggedness easily won him the reputation he was to hold the rest of his days - a good fighter, win or lose."

Looking back, one wonders if in fact, with the proper backing, Michael Hogan might well have become a World Champion. He was a noted trial horse to test young fighters as he got older. Indeed, he was an opponent for many champions and reputedly as good if not better and tougher than many of the champions he met. Many fight reporters, sports writers and fans of the time wondered if a particular champion could knock out O'Brien. However, putting O'Brien away was unheard of.

The newspaper tribute goes on to say, "He became an opponent for champions and, reputedly as tough a problem as any champ could meet in the arena."

Among the champions he fought were lightweight champion Benny



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