

# 14.

## A Decade of Boxing Fame

**I**N 1903 ONE James W. Coffroth, already famous as Sunshine Jim, cast his eyes toward the Daly City area as a home for the boxing empire he was building. Securing a license from the San Mateo County officials to hold "sparring exhibitions, he erected an arena on Sickles Avenue within fifty feet of the San Francisco County line. It is said that from this location Coffroth could secure protection from San Francisco police while operating under San Mateo County regulations.<sup>1</sup>

Soon training quarters and satellite arenas dotted the whole of northern San Mateo County. Among the most noted were arenas in the abandoned Union Coursing Park on Mission, a well equipped gymnasium near the rear of the old White House Saloon, and training quarters at Millett's near Colma Creek. Large crowds were attracted to these areas to watch the most famous names in boxing fight or to see them work out before their matches.<sup>2</sup>

"It was a real thrill to watch those work-outs," writes Edmund Cavagnaro. "Jack Johnson, for a heavyweight, was really a master boxer; Ketchell, a terrific puncher; and fearless Packy McFarland, a fast and terrific puncher and proved it in his only fight here. It seems his trouble was making 133 pounds weight."<sup>3</sup>

As stated, the fights that were held in the Sickles Street Arena were policed by both San Francisco and Daly City authorities. But those in the arenas further removed from the San Francisco county line were under the protection of Colma and San Mateo County authorities assisted by "a lot of Daly City citizens sworn as deputies."<sup>4</sup>

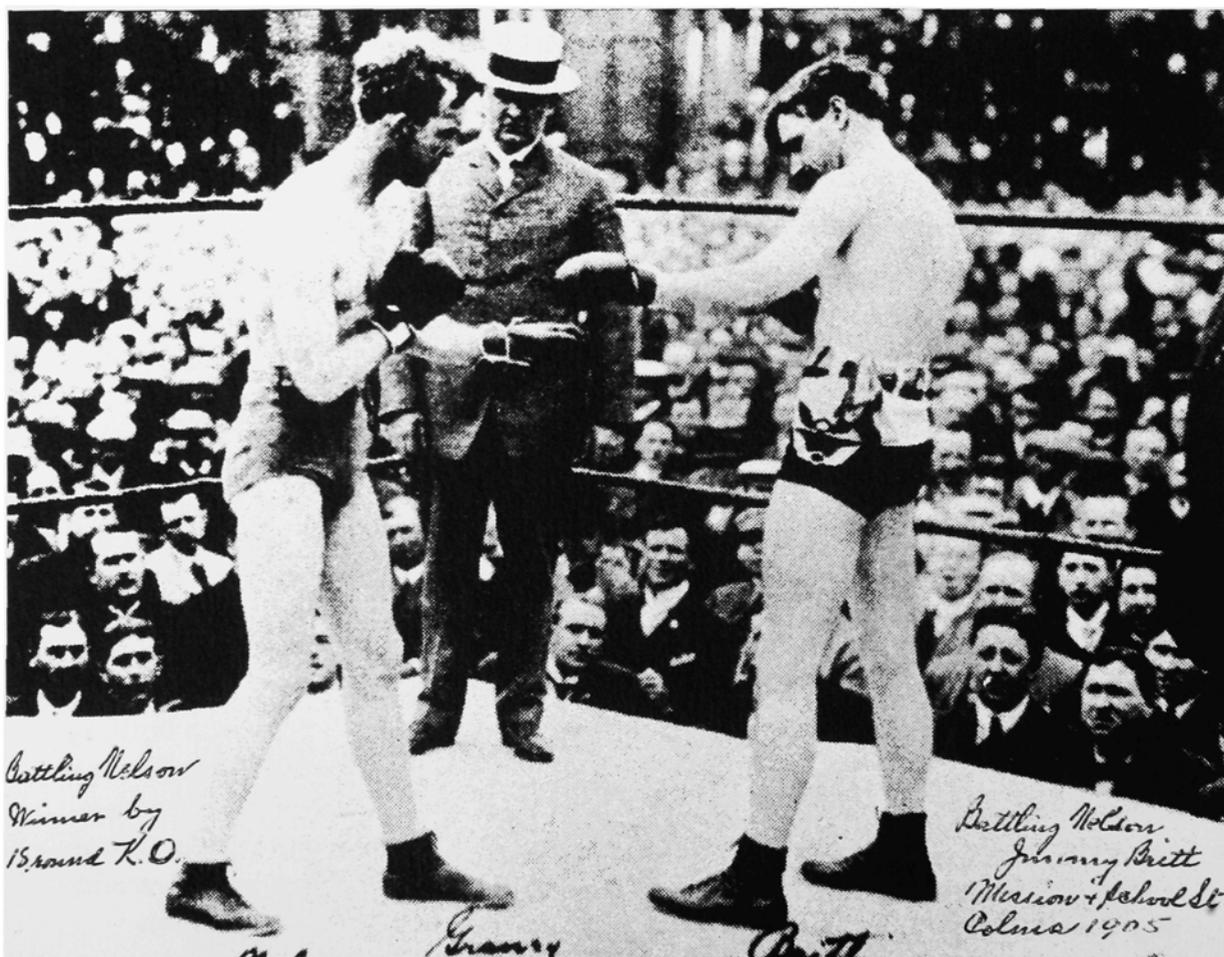
These men had plenty to do, for sometimes the atmosphere around the arena was so charged with excitement it produced far more fights outside of the arena than inside. For years after, the one time deputies recalled men being pulled from their horses and others being beaten to a proverbial pulp as they rushed to the arena.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most noted fights was staged September 9, 1905 with Battling Nelson tangling with Jimmy Britt. Another was staged in 1909 with Stanley Ketchell, middleweight champion, against Jack Johnson, the first Negro heavyweight world's champion.<sup>6</sup> Apparently Johnson had been living high and was concerned about Ketchell's knockout ability. So there was a private understanding that neither fighter would try "anything funny" (try for a knockout).

It proved to be a tame fight until the twelfth round when Ketchell saw an opening and forgot the understanding. With all his power Ketchell threw his famous right hand to the heavyweight's jaw. Under the blow Jack fell to the ground but bounced right up again and flashed a perfectly timed uppercut that put Ketchell on the mat to be "out for a whole hour."

Another world championship fight held in a Daly City arena saw San Francisco's own Willie Ritchie take the world's lightweight crown from Al Wolgast, who had lifted it from Battling Nelson, a noted veteran from the Daly City-Colma fight area. Indeed for nearly a decade the Colma-Daly City arenas ruled the lightweight as well as other divisions of boxing.

Besides Ketchell, Johnson, Nelson, Ritchie, Wolgast, and Britt, the northern portion of San Mateo County saw Tommy Burns, Billy Papke, Joe Gans, Bill Squires, Dick Hyland, Abe Attell, Owen Moran, and others whose memory adds romance to the San Mateo County communities where they fought. Also remembered are such men as Colma's own Joe Millett, who trained the great a score of years before 1915 when a California ruling against pro boxing ended what has been called Colma's decade of fame.



"BATTLING" NELSON VS JIMMY BRITT—MISSION & SCHOOL STREETS, COLMA—1905,  
NELSON WINNER BY K.O. IN 18th ROUND.