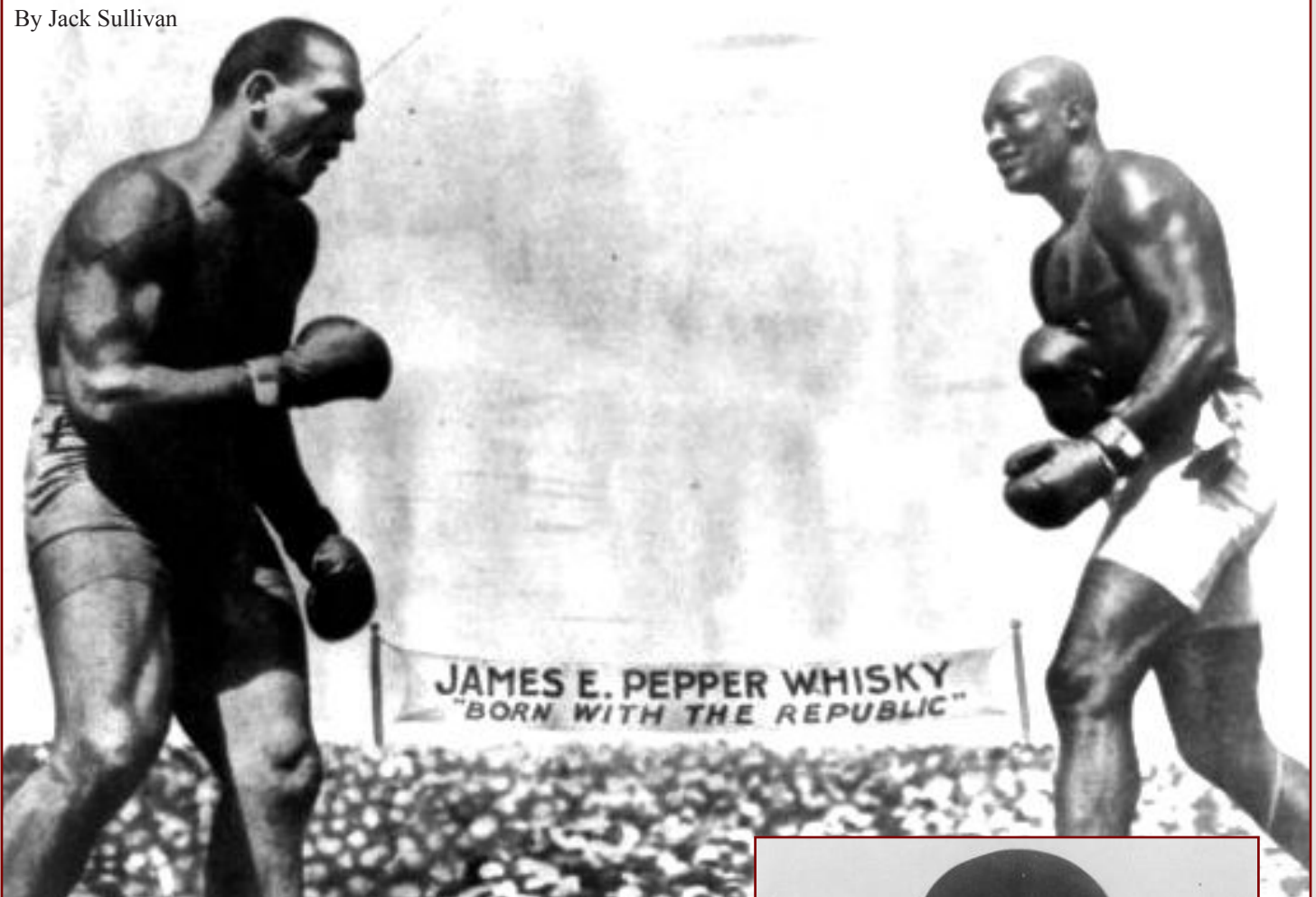


# Reno's "Fight of the Century" and Pepper Whiskey

By Jack Sullivan



Jack Johnson(right side) against a former champion, James J. Jeffries (left)  
With Rickard serving as the referee, the boxers sparred in a desultory series of 14 rounds, as a James E. Pepper banner flapped in the breeze behind them

**T**he 20th Century had only just begun, Mohammed Ali and Joe Frazier were not yet born, when a 1910 heavyweight boxing match was announced for Reno, Nevada, as "The Fight of the Century," pitting the champion, Jack Johnson against a former champion, James J. Jeffries. The bout might never have occurred, however, if it had not been for the James E. Pepper distillery 2,170 miles away in Lexington, Kentucky.

Reno seemed like the perfect place to hold a major heavyweight boxing match. As one writer put it: "For many Americans Reno was a moral as well as a physical desert." Gambling was wide open. Visitors could see a swinging door, push through it, and inside find the roulette wheels spinning and faro being dealt. Strong drink was readily available as well. In a four or five block area were more than fifty saloons, most with board floors and bare wooden walls.



(Fig. 1) "Gentleman Jim" Jeffries



(Fig. 2) Saloon and gambling hall called the "Louvre"

One major problem loomed with the site at Reno — "Gentleman Jim" Jeffries (Fig. 1). Some months earlier Jeffries had come to Reno, not to box, but to be the celebrity referee for a heavyweight fight. He was paid \$1,000 for his trouble. "Renoites turned out in a cheering throng to welcome the retiring champion....," noted one writer. After the fight, apparently feeling in an ebullient mood, Jeffries entered a local saloon and gambling hall called the "Louvre" (Fig. 2).

Pockets bulging with \$2,500 in cash, Jeffries joined a group at one of the Louvre's roulette tables. He soon was parted from his money. Unwilling to stop gambling at that point, Jeffries wrote two checks for \$2,500 each and then proceeded to blow the proceeds. In today's dollar his total losses would be equivalent to \$187,000. Before he left the Louvre, Jeffries' checks were torn up in exchange for his note for \$5,000 to be paid to the owner. Jeffries failed to pay, however, and never returned to Nevada.

For the owner of the Louvre the bout offered a chance to recoup on Jeffries' debt. He sued him. Although the case got little attention outside Nevada, the Nevada State Journal featured a front page cartoon of "Gentleman Jim" with a caption that read: "Jeffries the Welcher." The boxer through his attorney claimed that the Louvre roulette wheel was crooked and that anyway, gambling debts were not enforceable. At the least, his attorney pleaded, the trial should be postponed until after the fight. Recognizing that Jeffries was never likely to re-enter Nevada once he left, a local Reno judge set a trial date in advance of the fight and ruled Jeffries would have to appear.



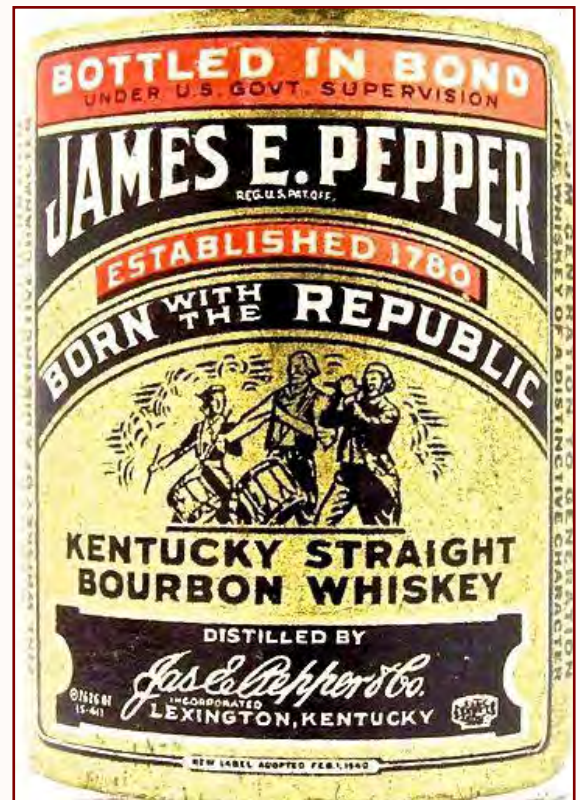
(Fig. 3) Tex Rickard, the fabled boxing impresario

Tex Rickard, the fabled boxing impresario (Fig. 3), had publicized the





(Fig. 4) Pepper's advertising and branding stressed the Nation's first war, appearing on serving trays.



(Fig. 5) Pepper's advertising and branding stressed the Nation's first war, also appearing on bottles.



(Fig. 7) A pint size bottle of Pepper's Whiskey



(Fig. 6) A full bottle of Pepper's Whiskey



(Fig. 8) A early Pint bottle of Pepper's Whiskey





(Fig. 9) An early Printed Advertisement for a saloon for Pepper's Whiskey

match nationwide as “The Fight of the Century” and millions of Americans were anticipating the event. As one observer put it: “The upcoming fight would be relentless hyped as a titanic clash of races, leaving little room for objectivity...Most Americans believed that Johnson was mentally and physically inferior and conversely believed in Jeffries’ invincibility.” The Louvre debt had to be paid off and the suit avoided.

In Lexington, Kentucky, a distillery that bore the name of its founder, James E. Pepper, offered an opportunity for Rickard. Pepper, from a notable distilling family, had built a major brand by claiming that his whiskey could be dated to the year 1780, smack in the midst of the American Revolutionary War. Throughout its history Pepper’s advertising and branding stressed the Nation’s first war, appearing on serving trays (Fig. 4), bottles (Figs. 5-8) and saloon signs (Fig. 9).

In 1906, James Pepper died. The following year a group of

Chicago investors acquired the distillery from the Pepper estate, bringing new equipment and ideas to the distillery and bottling operations. The new owners believed it necessary to “modernize” their marketing approach. Seeking other venues of advertising, “The Fight of the Century” seemed to offered an opportunity.

For exclusive rights to advertise liquor at the Reno event, the James E. Pepper Co. laid out a sizable amount of cash to Rickard

at a time when the promoter had a pressing need for money to pay off Jeffries’ debt and make sure the fight went forward. When that was accomplished only days before the scheduled event, boxing fans sighed with relief.

Reno itself buzzed with anticipation. A large outdoor arena was built near downtown as townsfolk eagerly watched its construction. As fight day approached, some 15,000 visitors stepped off trains or came by automobile from all over America to watch the spectacle. As they clustered downtown at the



(Fig. 10) As they clustered downtown at the hotels and saloons, a huge banner hung above them. It read: James Pepper Whiskey “Born with the Republic.”



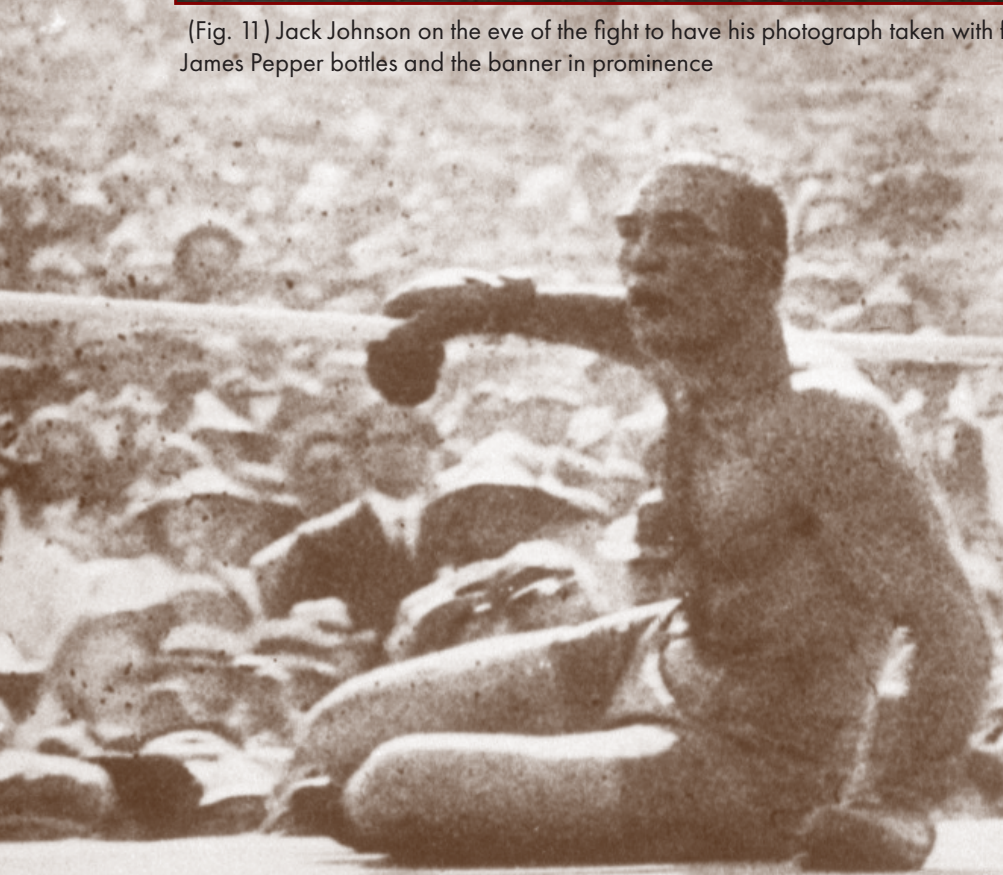


(Fig. 11) Jack Johnson on the eve of the fight to have his photograph taken with fans, drinking a glass of whiskey with James Pepper bottles and the banner in prominence

hotels and saloons, a huge banner hung above them. It read: James Pepper Whiskey "Born with the Republic." (Fig. 10).

Then the Kentucky distillery took another bold step. It contracted with Jack Johnson on the eve of the fight to have his photograph taken with fans, drinking a glass of whiskey with James Pepper bottles and the banner in prominence (Fig. 11). Johnson, known for his fondness for liquor, seemed delighted to advertise the whiskey. The photograph later was reproduced as a trade card by the distillery and circulated widely in black saloons.

Given all the hype, the so-called "Fight of the Century" turned out to be a ho-hum affair. Jeffries was several years away from his prime as



(Fig. 12) The final knockdown and end to the greatest fight of the early century



a boxer, overweight and rusty from being on a vaudeville circuit rather than in the ring. By contrast, Johnson for all his boozing and racy lifestyle was at the peak of his form. With Rickard serving as the referee, the boxers sparred in a desultory series of 14 rounds, as a James E. Pepper banner flapped in the breeze behind them. Finally, apparently deciding that he had given the fans all the action they needed, Jackson put Jeffries on the canvas and ended the fight (Fig. 12).

For the next eight years James E. Pepper was a nationally known brand with substantial sales. Newsreels of the fight had blanketed America and with them views of the Pepper whiskey banner. Because of World War One restrictions on malt and other grain, the Lexington distillery was

forced to stop making whiskey in November, 1918. The shutdown was closely followed by National Prohibition. After Repeal in 1934, under several ownerships, the Pepper brand was revived and continued until finally phased out in the 1960s. "The brand was revived once again in 2008 and currently available."

Note: The Reno "Fight of the Century" is available on YouTube in an abbreviated form. Excerpts from the silent newsreel are presented with a narration that captures the highlights of the bout. If you look very closely you may even get a glimpse of the James E. Pepper banner. The information on Jeffries' debt to the Louvre was gleaned from "The Last Great Prizefight: Johnson vs. Jeffries," by Steven Frederick, 2010.

