



### **Episode 3, Dempsey Fight Bell, Reno, Nevada and New York City**

Tukufu Zuberi: Next, the bell that may have rung in a golden era in American sports. It's the Roaring 20s and America is increasingly infatuated with movie stars and celebrities. One sporting star soars onto the celebrity stage – Jack Dempsey, heavyweight boxing champion of the world. It is Dempsey who helps launch our national obsession with professional sports. And it all began with the clang of a bell. Now Guy Clifton of Reno, Nevada, believes he's come across the very bell that helped ring in the golden age of sports in America.

Guy Clifton: A friend of mine said that, well, have you seen the Dempsey-Willard bell hanging down in Jake's Place? When I first saw it I thought, holy cow, could this really be real?

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. I'm meeting up with Guy to see what's he got.

Guy: Well, here it is.

Tukufu: Alright. July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919, Toledo, Ohio. Jack Dempsey-Jess Willard. What do you know about that fight?

Guy: Well, this is the fight when Jack Dempsey won the heavyweight championship of the world.

Tukufu: Alright. So that would make this bell a pretty big deal.

Guy: It sure would.

Tukufu: Does the bell work?

Guy: It does. [Clangs bell]

Tukufu: Now, that sounds just like the bell when you're sitting at ringside, right?

Guy: It sure does.

Tukufu: Now what is your question for me?

Guy: I want to know if it's really the bell from the Dempsey-Willard fight.

Tukufu: Guy's got a lead for me. It seems the bar is just using the bell to pull in customers.



Guy: Well, the family that owns the bell loaned it to this bar to put on display. Let me write their name down for you.

Tukufu: Now do you mind if I take this with me?

Guy: I think that will be okay.

Tukufu: Great. I'm a big fan of boxing, and this fight is legendary. If this is the original bell from the Dempsey-Willard fight, it's a valuable piece of history. I don't see anything in here; no brand name, no I.D. number, no serial number, no patent number, no information at all. And, again, nothing. So what I want to do now is take some photographs and send them to a professional sports auction house to see what they can tell me about when this bell was made. While the auction house looks over my photos, I'm meeting with another Reno resident, Evelyn Pace. She's the woman who's name Guy gave me back at the bar.

Tukufu: How are you?

Evelyn Pace: I'm fine.

Tukufu: Have you ever seen this bell before?

Evelyn: Yes, I have. It's been in my family for many years. It hung in my dad's bar. It's part of the family.

Tukufu: Evelyn tells me that before her father owned a bar he was a middleweight champion, back in the 1920's and 30's.

Tukufu: Look at this. Dick Action Evans. "Nineteen KO's in forty three fights".

Evelyn: Right.

Tukufu: Evelyn says that her dad was one of nearly 10,000 guys across the country making their living as boxers. The sport was hugely popular, second only to baseball. But the Dempsey-Willard fight gave the sport even greater prominence. And boxers like her father drank in their new found attention.

Evelyn: And when he quit fighting, he bought a neighborhood bar, and local fighters hung out there.

Tukufu: The bell was a big draw for those boxers. Dempsey was their patron saint. Evelyn says Dempsey lived in Reno for several years and was one of the fighters who used to spend time in her dad's bar. And that's how her dad got the bell.



Evelyn: Oh...here's a postcard. Look at that. Look on the back. It's autographed by Jack Dempsey.

Tukufu: Oh...yes, it is.

Evelyn: There's one of Jack Dempsey and my dad.

Tukufu: So this is them together.

Evelyn: At the bar.

Tukufu: Evelyn's dad certainly knew Dempsey, but did he really give him the bell? The Dempsey-Willard clash is on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919. That's just eight months after the end of World War I and Americans are ready to celebrate. The time is ripe for a major national event. Jess Willard is a household name. The Great White Hope had defeated African American boxer Jack Johnson for his title, but he hasn't defended it in four years. The upstart challenger, Jack Dempsey, is making a name for himself as the king of first time knockout. The public demands a showdown. It's a fascinating story, but I haven't found any evidence that connects our bell to the fight. I need to go to some photos that were taken on the day of the fight. I'm in New York, where I've scored a meeting with Bert Sugar. Bert's lived a life of boxing, covering all of the greats. He's the former editor of *Boxing Illustrated* and author of over 80 books on boxing history.

Bert Sugar: What have you got there?

Tukufu: So this is supposedly the bell from the Dempsey-Willard championship fight in 1919. What do you think? Is that it?

Bert: It's a bell alright. I don't know if it's the bell.

Tukufu: Do you have any pictures of the fight?

Bert: I have pictures of the fight. Maybe a picture of the bell, I'm not sure. Why don't we take a look.

Tukufu: Great idea.

Bert: Follow me.

Tukufu: As we start our search, Bert explains what made the Dempsey-Willard fight so popular. Behind the scenes a PR wizard was pulling the strings.



Bert: This is Tex Rickard. Now, Tex Rickard was a promoter. And in many ways he was a P.T. Barnum of his day and age. And he, basically, made this fight a grand event. So, here is a stadium that Tex Rickard decides to build on the banks of the Maumee Bay outside Toledo. 80,000 seat stadium built out of wood.

Tukufu: This stadium was at the time the largest in American history. It was created for this event. Then dismantled and sold for scrap. But for that one day in 1919, it was the stage for a boxing showdown.

Bert: Now, Jess Willard...and he was 6' 6", 245 pounds...

Tukufu: Wow!

Bert: ...who outweighs Dempsey by 58 pounds.

Tukufu: Yeah.

Bert: And he can hit. And he has already killed a man with one punch.

Tukufu: Although Jack Dempsey is a full five inches shorter, he's Willard's equal as a savage puncher. Several years earlier he'd been making his living battling drunks in bar room brawls.

Bert: He could take you out with one punch. More one round knockouts than any fighter in history. Twenty-six.

Tukufu: This fight really gave us a preview of what Dempsey's style could do. His style of fighting was just this aggressive.

Bert: Well, he – according to one writer at the time – turned the manly art of self-defense into the manly art of modified murder.

Tukufu: You have some pictures of the ring so that we can see if the bell is there?

Bert: Yeah. See, this is the first knockdown.

Tukufu: Alright. Where would I find the bell?

Bert: Well, theoretically, it's in this area, mid-ring.



Tukufu: We search his collection of fight photos, but I can't find any sign of the bell. It looks like I've hit a dead end.

Tukufu: I don't see a bell. But Bert has a lead for me.

Bert: I would suggest, cause we've looked at stills, that maybe if you looked at the films of the fight...

Tukufu: It seems that because the Dempsey-Willard match was such a huge event, a newsreel film crew documented the fight. And Bert knows someone who has a rare copy of the film. Steve Lott is a boxing historian and the president of the Boxing Hall of Champions. They own rights to the world's largest library of boxing films. Steve doesn't recognize our bell, but he's set up a screening of the fight. As we search through the films, Steve describes the first round. For the first thirty seconds, Dempsey keeps his distance from the massive Willard. But then, he goes on the attack.

Steve Lott: Watch Dempsey now...in about five seconds come in with a one, two, three...four!

Tukufu: Whoa! [Laughs]

Steve: That's the punch that knocked him out. Back then there was no neutral corner rule. The fighter does not have to go to a neutral corner.

Tukufu: Yeah.

Steve: Dempsey just stays over the fallen fighter. As soon as Willard's knees leave the canvas, Dempsey can jump on him again.

Tukufu: Oh!

Steve: A fight like that would be stopped immediately today. But back then, that's what boxing was all about. No mouthpieces. Willard ends up with a broken nose, fractured jaw, three teeth knocked out, broken ribs...based upon Dempsey's punching power.

Tukufu: It is this brutal first round that determines the fight. Willard's size is no match for Dempsey's devastating power. Willard struggles through two more rounds. By the fourth round, he can't continue. Dempsey is declared the new heavyweight champion of the world. Steve says Dempsey becomes as famous as Babe Ruth and more popular than presidents and generals. A few years later, in 1926, 120,000 fans watch Dempsey battle Gene Tunney in the largest sporting event in American history. As we reach the end of the round, I catch a break.



Steve: The crowd is in a frenzy. The bell rings...

Tukufu: Wait. Can you freeze it at the bell?

Steve: Sure. Hold on.

Tukufu: Steve and I compare Guy's bell with the one in the film. But he immediately spots some key differences.

Steve: The other side of the bell, this arm here raises up at an angle.

Tukufu: Right.

Steve: And yours is going down.

Tukufu: Mine goes down. And that one has two holes....

Steve: Right.

Tukufu: Mine just has one.

Tukufu: Too many things look different.

Steve: It just doesn't seem like it could be the same bell.

Tukufu: But Steve's not sure if the bell we see in the film really is the bell from fight day. He says that if the film crew really did shoot that bell during the Dempsey-Willard fight, we should be able to see the camera at ringside. And he says a camera from 1919 ought to be easy to spot.

Steve: They weren't portable back then. They were big, they were huge, they had to be on tripods.

Tukufu: Okay.

Steve: We don't see anything like that here.

Tukufu: We examined a stack of photos, but can't find any evidence of a camera that would have been used to film that shot of the bell.



Tukufu: So the bell we see in the film, where did that come from?

Steve: It could have been shot at a different fight, day before, day after.

Tukufu: And he has one more thing to show me.

Steve: I'm going play this for a second. Watch this spectator on the right reflected, this spectator's arm comes down. That's the end of Round One. Now I just want to fast forward to the beginning of Round Two. Hold it one second. Right here.

Tukufu: Yeah.

Steve: Now here's the bell for Round Two. Now I'm going to...It's the same action.

Tukufu: Same thing.

Steve: The same arm.

Tukufu: Yeah.

Steve: The spectator's arm moves exactly the same way...the same format, which tells me this shot of the bell was used more than once in this edited version of the fight.

Tukufu: Steve tells me it's possible that the bell we saw in the fight film was just a stock shot. And there's still a chance that our bell is the real thing. He's got a contact who's sure to know something about this bell. Steve's contact is Jack Kearns, the son of Doc Kearns, Jack Dempsey's fight manger.

Jack Kearns: My father put him out in a logging camp and had him chopping wood all day, carrying piles, driving the sleds and Jack just got hardened and he became the animal that he was famous for, from that point on. Jack would leap across the ring, elevate himself off the ground and hit you a punch in midair. He'd reach out and rip you with one of those left hooks and tear your head off.

Tukufu: So I have this little bell here. You ever see a bell like this before?

Jack: Oh, yes, I have. Many of them.



Tukufu: A gentleman from Reno named Guy Clifton believes that this is the bell from the Dempsey-Willard championship fight. Jack throws a verbal punch of his own. And it may be a knockout for my investigation.

Jack: My understanding was that it went to somebody else.

Tukufu: Jack says that the night before the Dempsey-Willard match, his father arranged for the local fire chief to meet up with two young women and a bottle of bourbon.

Jack: The fire chief and the two girls got in the fire truck and drove around Jess Willard's house all night long blowing the siren.

Tukufu: Jack says his dad wanted to make sure Jess Willard didn't sleep a wink that night. But what does that have to do with the fight bell?

Jack: My father gave the bell to the fire chief.

Tukufu: After the fight?

Jack: After the fight was over.

Tukufu: You're telling me this isn't the bell?

Jack: I seriously doubt that it is.

Tukufu: I feel like I'm against the ropes in this match. Now I've got two stories and both seem like they could ring true. I need a tiebreaker. Just then I get a call from the sports appraiser who I'd sent my photos too.

Tukufu: All right. Sure, I can bring it over. No problem.

Tukufu: Craig Hamilton runs Joe's Sports, one of the country's largest sports auction houses. He tells me that in his work as an appraiser, he's seen dozens of period fight bells.

Craig Hamilton: Well, it compares favorably to some other bells that that I've looked at and appraised for *Ring Magazine* and people like that. The lever on the top is similar to bells they have. And those predate 1919, so it certainly was a bell that could have been working at that time.

Tukufu: Alright. Well, you know, that's really good news for me, because that means that this bell is in the period of the fight. Do you know if this bell comes from the Dempsey-Willard championship fight?



Craig: It could be, but there are some things you do need to know about Jack Dempsey. Jack Dempsey was a very well-intentioned guy and he gave away a lot of stuff.

Tukufu: Craig shows me a news story about the gloves used in the same fight. But then he throws a jab that catches me off guard. It's time to head back to Guy, to tell him what I've discovered. Guy, for a boxing fan like me, this was simply a fantastic story. It allowed me to talk to people I've wanted to talk to for a long time. And to find out some things about Jack Dempsey that I didn't know. Now, let me start by saying the first thing we know is that this bell is a period bell. So it comes from the right period.

Guy: Okay.

Tukufu: We also know that Dempsey was friends with Evans and had the opportunity to have given him this bell.

Guy: I think that's great, again.

Tukufu: That's all good. Now, I heard a second story. I tell Guy Jack's story of the Toledo Fire Chief and his long lusty night circling Willard's mansion. We have two plausible stories. But then I heard something else. Craig shows me a photograph of the gloves Dempsey used in the Willard fight. But he also shows me an article in which Dempsey claimed two different pairs of gloves were from the same fight. It seems the fighter made claims about artifacts from his career that didn't quite hold up.

Craig: That's kind of a classic Dempsey thing. I think Dempsey was a very generous man. I think people that were close to him or people that were friends, he wanted to make them feel good, so he'd give them things and say they were from certain events. And he may even have believed that.

Tukufu: It seems very likely that Dempsey did give Dick Evans the bell. I also believe that it's possible that Dempsey told Evans that this was the bell from the Dempsey-Willard championship fight in 1919. But with a star as big Dempsey, with a life so full of myth and legend, sorting out boxing truth from boxing fiction can be next to impossible.

Guy: The fact that this bell with his name on it is still hanging up in restaurant in a public place is a pretty special thing. I think it keeps his memory alive. You know, 90 years after he won the championship and 25 years after his death, people are still talking about Jack Dempsey.