

David Campbell - The Boxer

compiled by Bruce Charles in 2010

Fire Chief Dave Campbell was born in the very twilight of the Civil War, the greatest test ever faced by an adolescent nation. As a strapping young lad, he combined his love of athletic pursuits with a sincere and lifelong dedication to firefighting. This would form the legend that would become David Campbell.

Born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania in 1864, Campbell would move to Portland in 1878 and shortly afterward become a member of the Portland Volunteer Fire Department. He would serve on Columbian Engine Company #3, Protection Engine Company #4, and Couch Engine Company at various times. In 1885, he would be hired as a member of the Portland Paid Fire Department and serve at Hose Company #2 and Engine Company #1.

His strong frame and keen intelligence gained notice among senior members of Portland's fledgling fire department. He rose fairly quickly through the ranks, becoming Foreman of Truck #1, District Engineer, then Assistant Chief under Chief Robert Holman. In 1895, he would become Chief Engineer of the Portland Paid Fire Department, appointed by Mayer Frank. His term of duty was cut short, for political reasons, but he would be reappointed by Mayor Mason in 1898 and would serve for thirteen more years until the Union Oil fire would take his life.

Dave Campbell learned quickly and was interested in all aspects of firefighting, from the physical to the scientific. Strong and able, he excelled in the many athletic competitions and challenges that this physical employment offered to its members. He placed at or near the top in every Fireman's Tournament. He would earn prizes in the dash at both the 100 and 400 yard distances. His roughneck and athletic nature was also perfectly suited to wrestling and boxing matches.

David Campbell participated in many an amateur boxing match. Word of his skill spread and he became a draw for bouts occurring in Portland. After a string of hotly disputed amateur boxing bouts, Campbell was set to meet Pete Lawler of San Francisco.

On the night of the Lawler/Campbell fight, a large crowd assembled at a Portland venue. Lawler, known as "Dublin Pete," was a native of Ireland and considered an expert boxer. Campbell, 22 years of age and weighing in at 176 pounds, was well conditioned and ready for the match.

The crowd that gathered was one of the largest ever for a boxing match in Portland. Lower rows were filled with newspapermen and leading business people of Portland. Upper seats were filled with excited fans.

The bell rang at 10 o'clock sharp. There was a rapid exchange of blows with neither gaining the upper hand.

Encouraged by the shouts of his friends, Campbell made a rush and Lawler went down to avoid punishment.

As he rose, Campbell caught him under the chin sending him to the grass. Upon rising, Campbell sent him into the ropes. The round closed with a sharp exchange of blows.

In the second round, after very little sparring, Campbell caught Lawler with a left under his chin, and quick as a flash, a right to his left ear. Lawler dropped to the floor on his face as though shot through the heart. His trainers hurried to raise him but he was limp as a ragdoll. He was carried him to his corner as the crowd climbed over the ropes, flooding the ring. The referee, as excited as the crowd, declared Lawler knocked out.

Campbell jumped from the ring and rushed to his dressing room, followed by two policemen. Lawler rose and walked with assistance to his dressing room.

By the time Campbell's next fight with Jim Reilly approached, his trainers could legitimately claim the mantle of Oregon's heavyweight champion.

Campbell was becoming widely known as one of the northwest's premier athletes. Newspapers across the state carried news of his exploits to their readers.

Some fights were relegated to steam boats plying the Willamette or Columbia rivers. These floating events were intended to stay one step ahead of the law, which tried to combat fighting and wagering. So it was with David Campbell's match against a man named Reilly.

The steamer "Salem" was chartered for this occasion and would set sail from the foot of Alder Street at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Not less than 400 persons were on board. A short time before the steamer "Lucia Mason" has sailed for the same destination with 150 persons on board. Both vessels would meet at Knapp's Landing some 22 miles below Portland on the Washington territory side of the Columbia. Further along on the river both vessels passed the little steamer "Seaside," loaded with passengers bound for the same rendezvous.

Another boat was seen steaming down the Columbia, as if coming from Vancouver. The boat proved to be the "Gov. Newell," which was bearing down under full steam with Sheriff Clough and a posse of 7 men board. His purpose was to prevent the fight. As Knapp's landing was reached Sheriff Cough and his men appeared and politely informed the group that if they insisted on holding the bout within this county, he would arrest the lot of them. There was much chagrin and good-natured complaint before the boats steamed off downstream to some point further down toward Kalama. They were joined by the "Uncle Richard" and the "Tom Morris" from Astoria, all with the same intent.

The flotilla arrived at a landing opposite Columbia City and disembarked. At 8:30 pm, all preliminaries had been arranged and the two boxers pronounced themselves ready. The rain began to fall in torrents. Reilly and his handlers stepped out and the crowd, drenched to the skin, began to growl. Upon their return, the referee and timekeepers were chosen. After the rules were read, Reilly walked over to Campbell's corner and shook \$100 before him and wagered he could whip him. The offer was immediately covered as Campbell in turn shook \$500 and asked him to cover that. Reilly declined and the fighters went to their corners. At 9:30 the men shook hands and the first round began.

Both men came together in good shape and confident. Reilly made the first move, but Campbell dodged and then planted two firm blows to Reilly's ribs. Campbell feinted with his left and followed with his right sending Reilly down with a thud. Campbell, seeing another opportunity, let out with a sledge-hammer landing a solid punch to the jaw, landing Reilly in the grass with a sprinkle of blood to his face.

As the next round began, Reilly looked groggy and his handlers looked glum. His ear was in terrible condition. Campbell landed another solid punch and Reilly again went down.

Reilly now looked desperate and confused. Campbell, on the other hand, was smiling and confident. Reilly led out and landed three good jabs into Campbell's breast. Quick as a flash, Campbell rallied with precision, landing Reilly on the ground again.

Reilly's friends were despondent but Reilly himself had a determined look that said he would never give up. Campbell, on the other hand, was cheerful and unscratched. No sooner had Reilly come within range when a right and left put him down again. Fortunately for Reilly, the bell rang, giving him a few short minutes of reprieve.

As the next round started, Reilly came out valiantly, landing two punches into Campbell's ribs. Campbell took it good naturedly and returned a powerful blow to Reilly's jaw, causing a fresh flow of blood and sending him to the ground yet again.

By the 13th round, Reilly's backers wanted him to throw over the sponge but he said "no." He came up slow and Campbell led with a left to Reilly's face and he went down like a log. His trainers rushed in and carried him to his corner but to no avail. David Campbell was declared the winner.

Summer brought rumblings of a possible match with Jack 'the Non-Pareil' Dempsey. Dempsey was a fearsome fighter and boxing's middleweight champion (A quarter century later, another Dempsey, 'the Manasas Mauler' a heavyweight, would adopt the same fighting name).

The Non-Pareil was hoping to make the Portland fight just another stop on his tour through the western states. As negotiations for the encounter were formalized and Dempsey's training in the Rose City intensified, press interest in the bout was piqued. Journalists scrambled for tidbits from each camp and it was evident from the stories running, that "Our Dave" would be the crowd favorite. Campbell was the heavier fighter by as much as ten to fifteen pounds, increasing his chances for victory.

The fight date of November 2nd was chosen and by 7 o'clock the steamers "Fleetwood," "Calliope," "Salem," and the "New York" were on the river packed with the sporting public and bound for the J. Spect farm on the south bank of the Lewis River, the sight of the encounter.

Once afloat, the vessels were joined by the "Lara Parker," a steamer out of Astoria. Soon, rowboats and freight- canoes with members of the Multnomah and Clatskanie nations also made their way along the river. More than a 1,000 men and boys were present under the driving rain

which did little to dampen spirits. At least one female was present, but disguised as a boy to conceal her identity. Dressed in homespun trousers and a fisherman's coat, she wore a skull cap pulled over her ears and topped off with a heavy tweed scarf.

As men rushed ashore lugging large coils of rope and struggling with the heavy ring-posts, the fearless young lady sat down opposite David Campbell at an improvised table, shifting her tweed coat and tugging at her cap to hide her pretty features. The woman was David Campbell's own cousin, Margaret "Maggie" Brady. Maggie would carry a bit of a conflicting interest in the fight. While the cousin of Campbell, she was the darling of Jack Dempsey.

Campbell rose and covered his broad shoulders with his robe. He asked a ring attendant to find a place ringside for his cousin. Capt. James Carroll was chosen referee. At 12:35 the men stripped and it was evident that both were in prime condition. Campbell wore pink tights and American colors and Dempsey was in white tights with the colors of the emerald isle.

When the bell rang, Campbell was eager and confident and after some careful sparring, launched out with his right, which Dempsey avoided with a cat-like move to one side. In dodging a second blow, Dempsey slipped on the wet grass but was up in an instant and cross-countered in fine style.

The first round had done nothing to destroy Campbell's confidence and he came up smiling for the second.

After some early sparring, Campbell landed a blow on Dempsey's ribs. Dempsey slipped and went down on all fours but quickly recovered and a rapid exchange of blows ended in a clinch. They were separated and Campbell got in a shot to Dempsey's shoulder. Dempsey countered with a strike to Campbell's. Time was called and the second round ended.

In the Campbell corner, his seconds worried. "Better better dazzle him with footwork!" they said. In Dempsey's corner, the fighter himself was directing operations. "I'll finish him up next round. I'm going after that big beak of his!" snorted Dempsey.

The third round opened with some sparring, then Campbell struck out a terrific blow which fell short and he slipped a little. The next instant he lay prostrate on his back, having fallen as though shot through the heart. Slowly he turned himself over and then got to his hands and knees. By this time ten seconds had lapsed and the Oregon champion was counted out.

Not five people on the grounds knew how it was done. Subsequent inquiry revealed that as Campbell was recovering from his slip Dempsey landed a swing blow on Campbell's chest and instantly planted one on the right side of Campbell's nose. It was broken by the blow but it is believed that it can be straightened.

Well wishers surrounded Dempsey. "Great job Jack, quick as a cat and strong as a lion!" one shouted. Dempsey was quick to silence them. "Come on boys! The fireman's a game fellow. Let's pitch in and cheer Dave a bit before we steam for Portland."

Back in the Campbell camp the door opens and Dempsey entered. "You're a stout boy Dave" congratulated Dempsey. "Come to stay on my good side Jack? I guess that's smart if you're counting on seeing Maggie Brady again" chided Campbell. Dempsey reached into his hat and pulled out a handful of coins. "Here ya go Dave, you're still a winner in my book!"

As the two men talked further, Dempsey extended a surprising offer. He invited Campbell to join up with the "Dempsey Combination," a traveling boxing show featuring Dempsey and some other boxers. Campbell was thoughtful about accepting. He said, "let me heal up a bit Jack, but right now I'm leaning the other way."

Dave Campbell would become a valued member to the Dempsey Combination, a tour that was part Vaudeville, and part Barnum and Bailey, with a dash of a Wild West Show thrown in. No longer constrained by having their meetings held in neighboring territories and on farmer's fields, one step ahead of the sheriff, The Combination now beckoned its audience to a wide array of venues, including opera houses and burlesque theaters. The combination included Jack Dempsey, Paddy Gorman, Tom Cleary and now the handsome heavyweight Dave Campbell, the fireman from Portland Oregon.

At their Baker City stop, the morning papers gave enthusiastic reports on the evening's performance. "The athletic and boxing exhibition in Rust Opera House last evening drew a large crowd of spectators, anxious to see the renowned Dempsey Combination. The Baker City Boys are handy with the gloves and furnished much sport in their set. Mr. R. Lawrence followed with a solo accompanied by Mr. ML Tichner on the piano, and was twice encored. Portland's Dave Campbell, champion of Oregon and by the way one of the handsomest men that ever wore tights, then favored the audience with a demonstration of Indian club swinging that was as graceful as it was skillful and was applauded time after time. Mr. Buzzart, of Baker City, next stood up for three rounds with Campbell. The third round concluded when Campbell hit Buzzart with a warmer in the bread basket that knocked him double. The evening concluded with a three-round contest between Dempsey and Pat Gorman in which the science of knocking a man unconscious was demonstrated."

After returning to Portland, Campbell resumed his duties with the fire department. Leave had been granted and the department was proud to have the young athlete serve as their rugged, goodwill ambassador. Jack Dempsey would propose to Margaret Brady and in January of 1886 the two were married in a packed St. Francis Church in East Portland. Dempsey's home was now Portland and though Dave Campbell called Maggie, 'cousin,' newspapers now referred to Dempsey as Campbell's brother-in-law. Soon, The Combination left for a tour of the eastern seaboard.

During another trip by The Combination to Butte, Montana, Campbell's good fellow image suffered a setback.

An article would appear in the local paper with the title "They go for blood and are promptly arrested."

The paper reported, "The sparring exhibition given at the Lyceum Theater Friday by the Jack Dempsey combination broke up in a disgraceful row between Dave Campbell and George

Kessler. It had been given out on the quiet, that Kessler would get half the gate receipts if he stood before Campbell for four rounds.

When the men crossed hands it was apparent that there was bloody work coming. Kessler rushed straight at his opponent but Campbell scored the first knockdown. There was much early clinching during which Kessler was scolded for head-butting by the referee. Campbell, speaking in a low voice remarked to Kessler, "Be a gentleman, I am no bulldog." Short-arm work followed during which the referee received a stinging blow to the face while trying to separate the combatants. This effort was unsuccessful and only when Dempsey took a hand did Campbell desist."

"In the third round the men went at it rough and tumble and the referee caught in a hip-lock with them, took a tumble to the floor. While the referee was down, both men fought viciously. The fourth round was more of the same, ending in a mad clinch and fall."

"The sheriff intervened and the referee gave first blood to Kessler but gave the fight to Campbell. Kessler stormed off in a towering rage to the dressing room. Campbell followed, and his excited manner betrayed his intentions. In a twinkling the two men were at it. During the struggle, a stove was knocked over falling through a muslin partition and into the audience room. The stove-pipe came down upon the fighters, the dressing-room caved in and the house was in danger of being set afire by a large oil lamp stored on the front shelf. The wreck of the house continued until the police arrived and placed both parties under arrest. Both were fined \$50 and released. No one regrets the matter more than Mr. Dempsey who spent the remainder of the evening preventing the men from coming together."

Dave Campbell's greatest day in the ring came with his bout with Gentleman Jim Corbett, a 23 year-old from San Francisco. Jack Dempsey had long stumped for the fight believing that his strong young stable mate could be victorious against the heavier Corbett. The bout was arranged for the Portland Mechanic's Pavilion and on December 28, 1889 all was set to go.

Over 3,000 people crowded the Pavilion grounds last night and a great rush of humanity followed the opening of the doors. Each person was striving to get through the narrow doors, only large enough to admit one man at a time. The police were powerless to prevent the crush. They yelled themselves hoarse trying to assure the throng that all would be admitted.

By 8:30 pm, the line was two blocks long and extended on both sides of Second Street. Inside the hall the crowd become impatient and clamored for sport. Orville, the aerial equilibrist, came out and mollified the crowd with some of his daring feats. Christole, the French wrestler, gave exhibitions of his strength. It wasn't until 10:00 pm that the fighters were ready.

Campbell weighed 163 pounds and looked thin and a trifle over trained. He wore pink tights and a white shirt with a green belt. Dave promptly settled down in the east corner and looked unconcernedly about the room smiling and nodding to friends.

Corbett and his seconds mounted the ring apron three minutes later. Campbell and Corbett smiled when their eyes met and Campbell half rose from his seat. Corbett, weighing in at 180 pounds, wore a dark shirt, light tights, and a green belt.

The match began with cautious sparring. Campbell broke the spell with a red hot right-hander to Corbett's belly. Jim landed a light punch on Dave's nose and Campbell countered with a smart right-hander in return. Time was called and Campbell went to his corner smiling.

The next round was more of the same. Corbett pressed the fight but with Campbell countering smartly. Round three was in Corbett's favor with several damaging blows made to Dave's nose.

The battle was see-saw for the next two rounds, with Corbett seeming the fresher man. The sixth was Corbett's and found Campbell bleeding from the nose. The seventh was nobody's round. Dave rallied in the next two rounds, with Corbett seeming careless, Campbell landed sharp blows to Jim's chest.

When the bell rang after round ten, the referee called the fight a draw saying both men were fresh. Corbett jumped up as mad as a March hare and wanted to fight another round. Police Chief Parrish refused to let the festivities go on. Corbett vented his rage to the press in his dressing room, "I shall write to San Francisco and tell them how they do things up here, it will kill sport in Portland! He didn't even give me a good sweat in the entire set to."

Campbell countered, "I think the fight was mine. The blows I gave him count for a great deal more than my nose-bleed, Mr. Corbett does not think of this."

But that is how it went into the record book. Gentleman Jim could take solace after going on three years later to defeat John L. Sullivan for the title of heavyweight champion of the world.

Dave Campbell would continue as a member of the Dempsey Combination as well as teaching boxing at the Multnomah Athletic Club. His work with the fire department became a growing passion and in 1892 Campbell was appointed foreman of Truck Company #1. A short time later he was promoted to district engineer under Chief Holman and finally, a second promotion to assistant chief. Dave Campbell's life as a gifted administrator and leader had begun.

Campbell was interested in every aspect of firefighting and respected by his fellow firefighters. In 1895, he would find great professional success and tremendous sadness. David Campbell was appointed Chief of the Portland Paid Fire Department by Mayor Frank. In the same year, Jack Dempsey, Campbell's colleague and brother in arms, died of tuberculosis at his Portland home, with Maggie by his side. He was 32 years old. He left behind two young daughters. Maggie Dempsey would count on her parents, who lived next door to the couple, to lighten the incredible burden. Campbell was one of the pallbearers for his great friend.

Though naturally gifted for the rigors of the political life that being Fire Chief brought in its wake, the post was challenging. It was an era of 'machine' politics and firemen saw reductions in pay. The following year saw their wages garnished to finance political machinations of party bosses. With the coming of a Mayor Pennoyer, Campbell would lose his post as fire chief. His fortunes would change in 1898, with the election of Mayor Mason. Dave Campbell would be reinstated and serve as Chief for the next thirteen years. During this time Campbell would be instrumental in ushering in a new era and several important changes in the department.

The transitions led by Campbell included evolving to a fully paid department, the acquisition of the first steam powered fireboat, the change from a system based on political patronage to a civil service system, and the transition from horse-drawn fire apparatus to motorized firefighting equipment.

Campbell's roughneck spirit, such a valued commodity during heady days of the Jack Dempsey Combination, was giving way to a thoughtful and even cautious public administrator. In firehouses, teams of men lived in close quarters for extended periods and were often the scene of conflict, including the occasional chair-throwing brawl. Campbell, always the level head, was measured and fair in his treatment of the members of a department he and others had worked so carefully to build.