



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County

Big-Screen Boxing, 1897

By Gilbert Gia
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Weeks after the Corbett-Fitzsimmons world heavyweight boxing match in Carson City, Nevada, several-hundred Bakersfield enthusiasts of the sweet science watched the fight "live" on a 10x10-foot, motion-picture screen. This is the story about that movie.¹

The genius of the production was Enoch J. Rector, an ex-Edison lab inventor who was also a risk-taker and keen businessman.² Rector paid \$13,000 for rights to distribute a movie of the fight, which he shot with a unique camera. He'd selected Easton's wide-format, 2x2-in (63mm) film,³ and in later weeks audiences saw the life-size images in great clarity and exceptional detail. The full-length film ran ninety minutes.

On fight day, some of America's wealthiest and best-known names were among the masses, and Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson were present to manage a sizable security force. Three months earlier, Earp refereed a match in San Francisco between Bob Fitzsimmons and Tom Sharkey, and when Earp stopped the fight in Round 8 and gave the decision to Sharkey, spectators nearly rioted. This time, promoters brought in a referee with absolutely impeccable credentials: Fifty-one year-old George Siler, chief correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*.⁴

About two months later, scenes from the Rector film were screened in Bakersfield at Armory Hall at the southwest corner of Nineteenth and K Streets.

¹ "In the late 1890s, many fight films were produced. I screened a 'comic' boxing short made by Edison around this time that shows two performers pretending to box -- it lasts about a minute. By checking the UCLA Film Archive catalog on line, I note that the archive holds a 35mm print of the 1903 Edison recreation of a Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight." (Apr 15, 2003 email to the author from Dr. Jonathan Kuntz, UCLA)

² B. Oct 9, 1863, Parkersburg, West Virginia-D. Jan 26, 1957. Biography: www.victorian-cinema.net/rector.htm

³ The resultant processed film, and the technology required to show it, assured Rectors exclusive use of the film.

The advertisement in a local newspaper read, "Marvel of the Age. Edison's latest and most wonderful invention, reproducing life-size scenes and figures. Including the Great Corbett Fight and Knockout. [Actress] Cissy Fitzgerald in her skirt, dances and winks. The Santa Fe Limited at a speed of 60 miles per hour. The Great Hurdle Race at Epsom Downs. The Boxing Tom Cats. The Closing of a Great NY factory at 6 PM showing over 1,000 people leaving the building. McKinley's Inauguration with 20 thousand people in motion. The Great Fire Scene and Rescue of Men and Women from a burning stable, and many others."⁵

At the turn of the century the film business was still exploring technology and pinning-down what it took to make profitable movies. Two years before the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight, C. Francis Jenkins of Indiana screened the first-ever moving picture that was projected life-size. But costs exceeded profits. In contrast, about four-hundred small-screen moving pictures were being profitably shown in the US, and it wasn't until 1903 that life-size moving pictures were commercially successful.⁶

Rector recorded the fourth world heavyweight championship ever held in the United States.⁷ The world champ was "Gentleman Jim" Corbett.⁸

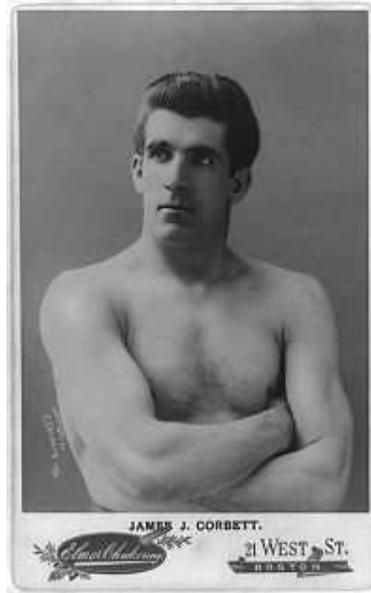
⁴ For an historical account of the fight see July 1998 *True West Magazine*, "A Questionable Fight in San Francisco" by Harold L. Edwards (Bakersfield historian).

⁵ *Daily Californian*, May 29, 1897

⁶ *Life of an American Fireman* ran six minutes and used 425 feet of film.

⁷ The first was fought in May 1880 at Collier Station, West Virginia, where the British world-champion Joe Goss met the Irish challenger Paddy Ryan. The bare-knuckle fight went on for 90 minutes, until the start of Round 88 when Goss was unable to come out of his corner. *Wheeling [West Virginia] Daily Intelligencer*, June 2, 1880 (<http://www.wvculture.org/history/sports/gossryan02.html>); The second was in Feb 1882 at Mississippi City, MS, where John Lawrence Sullivan of Boston KO'd Irish-American Paddy Ryan. In 1892 Corbett knocked-out 34-year-old Sullivan and walked away with a \$25,000 purse, or about \$550,000 today. See *Chicago Tribune*, Sunday, March 1, 1931, "Nobody's Business," Westbrook Pegler. [BAWLI (Boxing As We Liked It) Papers, J. Michael Kenyon, ed. (<http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/bawli/bawli63.txt>)]

⁸ Patrick James Corbett was born in San Francisco in 1866 and started boxing when he was nineteen. Today Corbett is known as the ring's first thinking fighter: He possessed not only speed but also a technique that allowed him to avoid his opponent's strength and exploit weaknesses.



(wikimedia.org/)

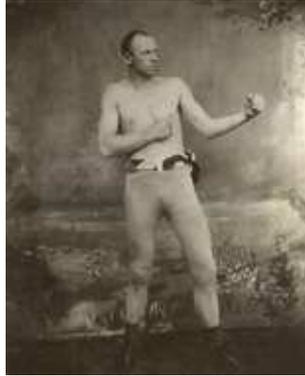
That fight in September 1892 was conducted under Marquis of Queensbury Rules: Three-minute rounds with boxing gloves "durable" to the satisfaction of the referee. Queensbury rules reduced the gore of bare-knuckle fights, and so elevated boxing's image, but gloved matches cause more blunt trauma. Gloved boxers could deliver more punches because there was less injury to their hands.



(Representation of glove size. Jimmy Clabby, abt 1910)
Library of Congress

Bob Fitzsimmons worked in his brother's blacksmith shop in New Zealand where the young man developed a massive upper body. At twenty-two Bob "Ruby Robert" Fitzsimmons started a 60-match fight career that, in 1890, elevated him to middleweight champion of Australia. He then went to the US where he quickly rose to top rankings.⁹

⁹ In many industrialized nations, prize-fighting was banned.



Fitzsimmons

<http://coxscorner.tripod.com/fitzsimmons.html>

Bakersfield's sporting crowd probably read about Bob Fitzsimmons in January 1891 when he fought champion Jack "Nonpareil" Dempsey at New Orleans.¹⁰ Dempsey had held the middleweight title for the past ten years, but the boxing life had taken its toll, his fight with Fitzsimmons was a mismatch, and Dempsey went down for the count in the 13th. Ruby Robert then became middleweight champion of the world, but the man also fought outside his weight class, and that is why Fitzsimmons met Corbett in 1897.¹¹

For the fight Rector built three "Veriscope" cameras that used special Eastman Company film. He arranged the cameras side-by-side so each would frame the entire ring,¹² and after six minutes of filming when the first camera ran out of film, the next was started. By the end of the fight, Rector's crew had loaded about fifteen reels and went through approximately 11,000 feet of film. It was the first time so much celluloid had been used in one continuous shoot.¹³

¹⁰ The Irishman Jack "Nonpareil" Dempsey was born John Edward Kelly. He was not the American heavyweight William Harrison "Jack" Dempsey, who adopted John Edward Kelly's ring name.

¹¹ When Fitzsimmons finally left the game in 1914, he was the only boxer to have held world championship belts in the middleweight, light-heavyweight, and heavyweight divisions.

¹² Rector had unsuccessfully tried to film an earlier scheduled fight between the two men.

¹³ "Many film companies at this time frequently copied, or "duped,"[or bootlegged] each other's films to meet exhibitors' demands for a certain product. Edison filmmakers were among those who engaged in this practice, and to protect their own films from being imitated the Edison Company began to copyright films regularly in October 1896. Registrations of films were sent to the Library of Congress for copyright deposit in the form of positive image paper photographic rolls. These 'paper prints,' along with those received from other companies, accumulated to form the collection known today as the Library of Congress's Paper Print."

(http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/bl_Edison_Motion_Pictures2.htm)

On St. Patrick's Day, 1897, in Carson City's new open-air ring,¹⁴ 183-lbs James Corbett met 167-lb Bob Fitzsimmons. The day was clear and viewing was superb, and weeks later when Bakersfield saw the fight, even the lines in the boxers' faces were distinct. Equally clear to Bakersfield fans was Fitzsimmons' appearance: He had the upper body of a heavyweight, but not the legs, and throughout the early rounds, the younger man battered and bruised the balding, thirty-four-year-old Fitzsimmons. In Round 6, Fitzsimmons went down for a count of nine. He was bleeding badly, but his stamina was still there.



(Representation: Jeffries-Sharkey Fight. Nov 3, 1899. Coney Island, NY. Mutoscope and Biograph Company. 37,000 feet. <http://bioscopic.wordpress.com/2009/01/07/the-jeffries-sharkey-fight/>)

All was not entirely well for Corbett, either. He hadn't kept himself in shape over the last three years and hadn't met a serious challenger. At the close of Round 13, Fitzsimmons' wife, Rose, yelled from ringside, "Hit him in the slats, Bob! Hit him in the slats!" And when the fighters came out at the gong, Fitzsimmons worked-over Corbett's upper body. One of the powerful blows struck Corbett just below the heart, he dropped for the count, and Ruby Robert was new heavyweight boxing champion of the world.

The Bakersfield movie ad that appeared in the *Daily Californian* shows that local fans saw only highlights of the bout, but twenty cities in the county watched the full-length fight. As many as nine months later the US public still hadn't seen enough because Rector's film was then playing at the New York Academy of Music. And it wasn't seen just in America; in September the film also

¹⁴ The event was Nevada's first legally-sanctioned prize fight.

played in Britain, where audiences paid willingly to see Fitzsimmons, their countryman, beat the American Corbett.¹⁵



Representation: 1895-96: Vitascope motion picture projector, Edison Manufacturing Co. (http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/bl_Motion_Pictures_Vitascope.htm)

The long-term, financial winner in this was Enoch J. Rector, who should have been awarded his own championship belt for promotional ingenuity. When his receipts were counted, the Corbett-Fitzsimmons film pulled in more than \$750,000, or about \$16.1 million today. Because no copy of the film seems to be available, a yet-bigger winner might turn up someday if the lost reels are ever discovered.

¹⁵ Although Rector's film was the first big-screen motion picture ever shown in Bakersfield, not everyone was enthusiastic. A day before it played, the *Daily Californian* ran a morally high-toned editorial citing California's law against prizefighting and condemning the "exhibition" boxing bouts that took place in San Francisco's in full presence of police.