



## KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

### Jess Willard (1881-1968)

Jess Willard was born in St. Clere, Kan., in rural Pottawatomie County. Willard grew up a working cowboy. At six feet five inches tall and weighing in at 235, Willard earned the nickname Pottawatomie Giant when he decided to pursue a career in boxing at the age of 29.

In 1915 at the time Willard began boxing, he was the largest boxer to ever compete professionally. Despite his size, he was agile and fairly quick in the ring. His 83-inch reach helped him defend more easily against opponents and attack from a distance. In 1913, Willard fought a young fighter named John "Bull" Young and landed a strong uppercut to his chin. Willard's power caused the base of Young's jaw to drive into the brain, and he died the next day. Willard lived his life haunted by the incident.

Willard went on to defeat top-ranked opponents and earned a spot in the championship bout of 1915. On April 4, he was to fight Jack Johnson, the current Heavyweight Boxing Champion. Johnson, the first African-American boxer to earn this title, had held the title for nearly five years and refused to fight other African-Americans in the ring. Several white opponents had attempted to take the title during his reign, but none were successful.

The fight between Johnson and "The Great White Hope," as Willard was called, took place in Cuba in front of approximately 25,000 fans. Willard was too strong and delivered repeated punches to Johnson's body; Willard finally knocked out Johnson after a grueling 26 rounds, winning the title of World Heavyweight Boxing Champion.

Willard continued to box and held the title for four years. On July 4, 1919, he was paired to fight Jack Dempsey but was still picked to win. Several members of Dempsey's camp encouraged Dempsey not to fight Willard. They warned that the fight might kill him, and that Willard's size was too much to overcome. However, the fight turned out quite different from what was expected. Dempsey knocked Willard down seven times in the first round and won after just three rounds. Willard suffered a broken jaw, cheekbone and ribs, and lost several teeth.

After such a decisive defeat, Willard retired from boxing and returned to his life as a cowboy. In addition, he did some acting, appearing in a vaudeville show, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and two movies. After four years of retirement, Willard tried to return to boxing. He beat Floyd Johnson but was subsequently knocked out by Luis Firpo. This marked the final fight of Willard's career.

Willard never really enjoyed the violence of the sport and never forgot his fight with John "Bull" Young. But he had earned his spot in boxing history (as well as \$100,000 for his fight against Jack Johnson!). Willard died in 1968, just two weeks before his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday. In 2003, Jess Willard was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame posthumously.

