The twentieth-century saw a number of famous—or infamous—boxing matches. Muhammad Ali-Joe Frasier or Mike Tyson-Evander Holyfield. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth-century, before HBO and Pay-Per-View television, boxing was already a popular sporting event, and championship matches were well attended. While boxing was in the process of organizing and keeping statistics, the sport was very much a public show. Langtry’s Judge Roy Bean was a showman, and he knew how to make a buck. February 21, 1896 was the day that Bean made his national reputation—the day of the Bob Fitzsimmons-Peter Maher Prizefight.

A Dallas promoter, Dan Stuart, the president of the Florida Athletic Club in that city, planned to sponsor a fight between James J. "Gentleman Jim" Corbett (1866-1933) and Robert James “Ruby Robert” Fitzsimmons (1863-1917). In 1892, Corbett was the first heavyweight champion to win a match governed by Queensbury Rules and wearing boxing gloves—instead of the previous bare-knuckle matches. Fitzsimmons had already won the middleweight championship and was ready to fight in the heavyweight division.

Boxing, which was then called prizefighting, was illegal in Texas. A law passed in 1889 had made boxing a licensed profession, so that as long as the proper fees were paid, the governor could not stop the fight. Texas Governor Charles A. Culberson was publicly opposed to the proposed fight and to boxing in general. On October 1, 1895, Governor Culberson called the Texas Legislature into Special Session in order to pass a law prohibiting boxing and “kindred practices.” The problem was that “nine men out of every 10 in Texas wants the prizefight.” When
the Special Session was called, the legislative leaders were caught by surprise by the call. Nevertheless, on October 3rd, the legislature banned boxing. The fight was not going to be held in Texas.¹

Suggestions were made to hold the fight in some other place, but other states objected as well. “Governor Clarke of Arkansas made it clear he would enforce the laws of his state if the fight were scheduled there. ‘I will enlarge the walls of the state penitentiary, if needs be, to accommodate the crowd,’ he said.” U.S. Attorney A. C. Cruce announced that the fight was not going to be held in the Indian Territory. Wisconsin and Illinois promoters tried to have the fight there but were prevented by local laws. A Missouri organization suggested holding the fight in the middle of the Missouri River. Overseas sites such as Australia were mentioned. Once El Paso became the focus of attention, the Arizona National Guard was called to prevent it from being held in that territory. New Mexico and Texas officials agreed not to allow the fight on the disputed land along the border of the two states. A suggestion was even made that the fight be held in a hot-air balloon, apparently to be above and beyond law enforcement authorities.²

While Stuart attempted to find a site for the bout, Corbett retired from boxing. It looked like the fight was going to be called off. Corbitt had been ready to quit when he saw his sparring partner knocked out in sixty-three seconds by Irishman Peter Maher (d. 1940).³ Seizing the opportunity, Corbett congratulated Maher and resigned the championship in favor of the new, unknown fighter. Fitzsimmons was furious, but his manager immediately challenged Maher. The fight was on once again—if a site could be found.⁴

³ Some sources state that Maher was the boxing champion of Ireland.
It was at this point that Bean became involved in the fight. The citizens of El Paso raised a $10,000 purse; later it was raised to $15,000 with the idea that the fight would be held across the border in Juarez, Mexico. Fitzsimmons traveled to El Paso to begin training. Shortly afterward, Maher arrived but then traveled to nearby Las Cruces to prepare for the fight. As spectators gathered, so did law enforcement authorities. U.S. Marshals, Texas Rangers and, later, extra contingents of both arrived to prevent the fight. In Mexico, 150 soldiers were sent to Juarez to block the event as well. Soldiers at Fort Bliss were ordered to stay on the post. And then Maher rode into El Paso with an eye ailment resulting from alkali dust. Doctors said it would heal quickly, but the fight was postponed.5

But the fight was not to be delayed for long. To keep the interest high, the promoter, Stuart, announced that the fight would be filmed with an Edison kinetoscope, an early type of filming camera that took forty frames per minute. Eventually, “Stuart placed a placard in the window of his office. ‘Persons desirous of attending the fight will report at these headquarters tonight at 9:45 o'clock. Railroad fare for the round trip will not exceed $12.00.’ Crowds milled around the building until only minutes before train time, when 10 extra cars were added.” The spectators, the press and the law boarded the train, which pulled out of El Paso heading east late on February 20.6 (The proposal to film the fight brought up the issue of who would receive the money from the film rights: the fighters or promoters. The promoter made it very clear to an angry Fitzsimmons that the fighters would get nothing extra: “You boys are getting paid to fight not act.”7)

Speculation was that the train would take them to Galveston and the fight would take place on a barge hauled into international waters beyond the jurisdiction of American authorities. But

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6 There is a phrase "one riot, one Ranger" used to describe Ranger toughness. Nevertheless, eighteen Rangers were among the contingent of officers.
Bean had something just as imaginative in mind. The train stopped at Langtry. The train-trip was timed to arrive just after a train from San Antonio delivered a fresh supply of beer, which Bean sold at a dollar per bottle. When the train pulled into Langtry, the ten carloads poured out, and Bean pointed them towards the Rio Grande.  

Bean had set up a fighting ring on a sandbar in the Rio Grande—beyond the reach of the law. Mexico had also outlawed prize-fighting, but had no law enforcement personnel on hand. The ring was built on the floor of the canyon between the tall cliffs. Unfortunately, those tall cliffs cut into Bean's profit margin. The paying spectators had to pay a toll to walk across the pontoon bridge to the ring, which was surrounded by a canvas fence. The fence was not nearly high enough to block the view of non-paying spectators sitting on the cliffs above the ring. Some spectators paid twenty-five dollars to sit in the wet grass at ringside, but most sat on top of the cliffs which provided them with a clear—and less expensive—view.

The fight began, and the Texas Rangers stood by, powerless to stop it. The match, however, ended quickly. The fighters were brought into the center of the ring. A hammer sounded on the bottom of a tin pail. “Maher rushed Fitz, swinging wildly. Bob hemmed him into a clinch, then pushed him aside. Maher connected with a left that pulled blood from Fitz’ mouth. Stung, Fitz pounded Maher halfway across the ring before landing the crusher—a right uppercut to the jaw. Like a steer struck by an ax, Maher slumped. He tried to pull himself up. He crumpled. Unconscious.” In ninety-five seconds Fitzsimmons knocked Maher to the mat. (One can presume both men threw powerful punches. Fitzsimmons had been a blacksmith, while Maher had been a cooperator. Boxing, in those days, was very much a working class sport.)

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8 King, Prizefight On the Rio Grande, page 31; Colorful Scrap; Williams, Once Upon a Time, page 40.
9 King, Prizefight On the Rio Grande, page 31; Colorful Scrap; Williams, Once Upon a Time, page 40; Skiles, Judge Roy Bean, page 7.
10 King, Prizefight On the Rio Grande, page 31; Colorful Scrap; Williams, Once Upon a Time, page 40; Isenberg, John
The best story that came out of this fight was that of a New York sporting man who had journeyed all the way to El Paso, had hung around there for days waiting to see the fight, and then, boarded the fight train to the scene of the fight, and finally paid top dollar for a ringside seat. “As the fighters stepped to the center of the ring he pulled a cigar from his pocket and turned to another ‘ringsider’ seated just behind him to get a light for his cigar. When he turned toward the ring again the fight was over, Fitzsimmons having ended it with a single blow. After all his trouble and expense and a trip across the continent this New York man didn't even see the fight.”

The fight in Langtry would have made media history too, but the fight ended “even before the camera operates could get the Kinetoscope started.” Bad weather is also reported as a factor preventing the filming of any of the event. (The 1897 fight between Fitzsimmons and Jim Corbett was the first to be filmed.)

“Fitzsimmons received the Police Gazette diamond belt representing the championship of the world and the promise that he would receive the $10,000 that had been left safely in El Paso.”

In 1897, Fitzsimmons went on to beat Gentleman Jim Corbett, who had came out of retirement, confirming his heavyweight title. That heavyweight title is only part of why Fitzsimmons was so famous in the sporting world. Before Bob Fitzsimmons retired from the ring, he became the “first triple titleholder in history,” the world champion in three weight classes: middleweight (1881), heavyweight (following the 1896 bout), and light heavyweight (1903). He was a member of the

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L. Sullivan, page 75.
11 King, Prizefight On the Rio Grande, page 31; Colorful Scrap; Williams, Once Upon a Time, page 40. Different sources suggest different amounts of time, the longest being two minutes and thirty-five seconds, less than a full round of boxing. The rough consensus is about a minute-and-a-half.
That part of the Rio Grande is now part of Lake Amistad, and a great deal of silt has been dropped onto the canyon floor. “They are probably catching fish for supper now at the spot boxing fans paid $20. apiece to see Robert Fitzsimmons win the 'heavyweight title' from Peter Maher.” “Heavyweight Title Bout Site Is Now Underwater.”
13 Skiles, Judge Roy Bean Country, page 36.
first class of inductees of boxers inducted in the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990, along with more recent notables Jack Dempsey, Joe Lewis, Rocky Marciano, and Muhammad Ali.\textsuperscript{14}

Boxing has always been a truly international sport. In 1896, an Englishman raised in Australia fought an Irishman in an American venue that was actually located in Mexico. Championship bouts have often been located in exotic locales, Las Vegas, the “Thrilla in Manilla” and such. Once upon a time, those exotic locales included the canyon of Rio Grande at Langtry, Texas.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Roberts and Skutt, \textit{The Boxing Register}, pages 80-81.
\textsuperscript{15} The Val Verde County Historical Commission will place this historical marker at the top of the cliff overlooking the site of the 1896 makeshift arena, where law enforcement and non-paying spectators watched the championship bout.
Bibliography—


Attachments—

Page showing the fighting ring in the Rio Grande canyon. The boxlike structure at the right housed the kinetoscope.

Three pages with pictures of Fitzsimmons; the captions on each tell part of his story

Page showing Peter Maher. The source website has some inconsistent dates but states he was the Irish champ.

Page showing Jim Corbett.

Page from Smithsonian guidebook mentioning the prizefight.

Page from my college’s government textbook mentioning the prizefight.