

Offbeat Oregon

World champion boxer by day, shanghaier by night

By FINN J.D. JOHN
FOR THE SENTINEL

In 1903, shanghaier Larry Sullivan was at the height of his power in Portland. Hard-fisted and belligerent, yet socially polished and with what passed in old Portland society for refined manners, he was able to seamlessly move between the rough, hard-drinking world of the old North End waterfront, and the refined gentlemen’s-club atmosphere of the Arlington Club.

It was Larry who’d first realized that, by organizing the great anonymous population of sailors drifting in and out of port, he could create a political base for himself and use it to swing elections with gangs of “repeaters” who would drift from ballot box to ballot box on Election Day.

This led to Larry becoming politically well-connected enough to start taking over the sailors’ boardinghouse business in Portland.

(Sailors’ boardinghouses were lodgings in which sailors could stay “on credit” while their ships were in port. When a ship needed a crew member, the owner — called a “boarding master” by his friends and a “crimp” by everyone else — basically picked one of his guests, like a chef selecting a lobster from the tank to cook

for a customer and forced him to ship out.

The crimp then collected the sailor’s room and board from the captain of the ship as an advance against the sailor’s future wages — plus a bonus fee that was popularly called “blood money.” Shanghaing, which all crimps practiced from time to time but which they all vigorously denied ever doing, was doing the same thing with a stranger who was not a boardinghouse guest — a new friend at the bar, for instance, or the out-of-town customer of a friendly prostitute.)

In the late 1880s, Larry partnered up with the Grant brothers of Astoria, forming the dignified-sounding firm of Sullivan, Grant Bros. & McCarron — forming a solid Portland-Astoria consortium. Then, after the Grand Old Man of Portland shangaiers, Jim Turk, weakened his position by trying to open a shop in Tacoma in 1891, Larry and the Grant boys moved in on his racket.

Then when Turk died, in 1895, Larry changed up his game. The plan, now that Turk was out of the way, was to establish a monopoly; leverage his political connections at the local and state level to give him political cover; and jack up the prices he charged the ship captains for his services.

Accordingly, he set about running all the competitors out of the boardinghouse business.

By the turn of the century, he’d succeeded in doing so, and had the market to himself ... with one especially galling exception.

Amos “Mysterious Billy” Smith was originally from Canada but settled in Portland around 1893 or 1894. When he arrived in Stumptown, he was boxing’s official Welterweight Champion of the World — a title he earned in 1892 and held, on and off, until 1900. (Welterweight is the middle weight class, for boxers 140 to 147 pounds; heavier than Lightweight and lighter than Middleweight.)

However, boxing was a side hustle for Mysterious Billy; apparently it didn’t make enough money to live on, even for a world champion — or, more likely, managers and promoters were raking off all his winnings. His day job was as a crimp.

Mysterious Billy started his crimping career circa 1895, working as a boardinghouse runner for Larry Sullivan.

The two of them, as professional boxers and very rowdy men, hit it off right away. A hilarious news article from 1896 tells of the courtroom drama that followed a massive

knock-down-drag-out bar fight that Mysterious Billy started when out drinking with Larry.

The two of them, with a companion named Jack Fahle, went to the Spokane Saloon near Second and Burnside, and there they encountered a trio of Swedes drinking 20-ounce “scoops” of beer.

Billy, having already shipped a full cargo of intoxicating beverages before arriving at the Spokane, took offence at something one of the Swedes said, whereupon (in the words of the Oregonian’s reporter) he “jumped on him and pounded his head till it was soft.”

“About this time Powers” — the owner of the bar — “entered the room,” the reporter waggishly recounts; “and, seeing that the well-known reputation of his place for a quiet and orderly house was somewhat in danger, he proceeded to restore quiet and harmony by seizing a chair and laying about him with it among the three Swedes. His night bartender also took a hand in the scuffle, which raised such a commotion that a police officer entered to see who was being killed.

“On the arrival of the officer, the three Swedes were the only ones that knew anything about any trouble, Powers, Smith, and the bartender having apparently forgotten all

about the disturbance.”

Billy was fined \$25 for this little bit of horseplay. Larry, who had the good sense to leg it before the cops came, got off scot-free.

But the peace and amity that made it possible for Billy and Larry to go out together to drink and brawl with loggers was not to last. About five years after the Spokane Saloon incident, Billy partnered up with the White Brothers — Jim and Harry, who were also working as runners for Sullivan at the time — and established a sailors’ boardinghouse on the east side of the river, by the Albina grain docks.

Although Billy and the White boys saw their operation as covering the east side and leaving the west side to Larry, Larry didn’t see it that way. For him, competition was competition. It was to be gotten rid of as expeditiously as possible.

Of course, Larry’s usual way of doing this involved pounding heads until they were soft. He was a skilled and accomplished heavyweight boxer, a talent that frequently came in handy when it came time for one of his guests to ship out and the guest was reluctant to fulfil his “obligation.”

But Mysterious Billy was the welterweight champion of the world. And sure, as a heavyweight Larry had a good 50 pounds on him; but he was no world champion, and plus he was getting older.

So, Larry pulled some strings in the Legislature and got Billy’s operation outlawed.

Now, as a practicing historian I have to confess that I have no hard evidence that Larry pulled those strings. But, knowing how well connected he was politically, the fact that in 1903 the state Legislature created a Sailors’ Boardinghouse Commission whose obvious sole purpose was to grant a monopoly to Sullivan, Grant Bros. & McCarron is good enough for me.

The new commission moved immediately to do exactly that. It issued pin-on badges to Larry and his employees identifying them as authorized crimps, and a letter to Billy and his partners ordering them to immediately cease and desist

operations.

The commission members justified this little exercise in “Conspiracy in Restraint of Trade” with the highly dubious claim that, by establishing a monopoly in the boardinghouse business, they were acting to reduce prices. Since Turk’s death, Sullivan had consolidated his monopoly and used it to run the average blood-money bonus up over \$100 a head; shippers had started avoiding the port, and consequently the cost of shipping sailors was on everyone’s mind.

What Sullivan did was to boldly harness that sensitivity and use it to make things worse, while trying to convince everyone that it would actually make things better. It was rather like a fox arguing that the solution to a chicken predation problem was to license a single fox to eat all the chickens.

The problem was, although the new commission had the law on its side, it had none of the popular respect and legitimacy that usually goes along with it.

This was probably because, although it was fully empowered to revoke licenses for all violations of the state law (for instance, boarding incoming ships to entice sailors to desert, or charging \$100 blood-money bonuses instead of the legally stipulated \$30), it never did anything of the sort.

Those practices went on unabated and unpunished. What the commission did do, at every opportunity, was to order all of Larry Sullivan’s competitors to go out of business.

Those competitors, not surprisingly, challenged the commission’s authority, both in the courts and on the streets.

We’ll talk about what sort of success they had, and how the Portland Shanghaing Wars concluded, in next week’s column.

(Sources: *Portland’s Lost Waterfront* and *The Oregon Shanghaiers*, two books by Barney Blalock published in 2012 and 2014 respectively; *Portland Morning Oregonian* archives from 1896, 1902, 1903, and 1904)

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