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**Jack Dempsey in Tampa: Sports and Boosterism in the 1920s**

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On Wednesday afternoon February 4, 1926, heavyweight champion of the world William Harrison “Jack” Dempsey fought seven rounds of exhibition matches with four opponents in an outdoor ring specially constructed on the property of real estate developer B.L. Hamner in what is now the Forest Hills section of Tampa. None of the estimated crowd of 10,000 paid a cent to see the famous conqueror of Jess Willard, Georges Carpentier, Luis Angel Firpo (“The Wild Bull of the Pampas”), and Tommy Gibbons demonstrate some of the skills and spectacular personal appeal that had made him one of the era’s greatest sports heroes.

With the passage of time Dempsey would become an authentic legend, a sports immortal. Three other legendary sports’ heroes, Harold “Red” Grange, Jim Thorpe, and Babe Ruth also visited Tampa around the time of Dempsey’s appearance. Grange and the aging Thorpe opposed each other in an all-star football game played January 1, 1926. Ruth, who would become probably the nation’s all time greatest sports’ hero, was in the region just prior to spring training to play a little golf, to relax and stay fit, following a sub-standard (for Ruth only) 1925 season when beset by injuries, quarrels, and his own lack of discipline, he saw his batting average drop from .378 to .290 and his home run production decline to a seven-year low of twenty-five. In a nationally syndicated article, printed in both the *Tampa Morning Tribune* and the *St. Petersburg Times* on February 4, Ruth was grandiosely termed a “Modern Crusader,” seeking to recapture the “Grail” of “his reputation as the mightiest slugger in baseball.”1 Still, Jack Dempsey was locally the main attraction of the time.

In retrospect Dempsey’s visit was a minor event in the champion’s life, but his public performance presents an illuminating episode in his career and southern Florida’s history, pulling together and spotlighting cultural strands that reveal much about the sources of Dempsey’s growing popularity and the extent to which he increasingly appeared to manage his own affairs rather than being a product of manipulative forces controlling his actions. In the narrative of Dempsey’s sojourn, even so trivial a subject as the legitimacy of his recently repaired nose would assume an importance in the eyes of his followers (and detractors), much like the bones of a saint might be squabbled over by true believers and scoffers. In terms of Florida history, his brief visit to the state provides interesting insights into the region’s promotional techniques, real estate business, and attempts to revive and stimulate the state’s once burgeoning movie industry. On the national level, much of the publicity attending Dempsey’s greatly ballyhooed stay in Florida (culminating in the Tampa exhibition bouts) underscores the racism infesting American sports during perhaps its first boom decade, and offers a classic example of the connection between play and business during sports’ Golden Age, demonstrating how sports heroes, increasingly thrust into the marketplace in America, could be used to help sell commodities like property or concepts such as community spirit. Mainly, however, Jack Dempsey’s visit to Tampa provides fascinating insights into the life of a great sports hero who wanted to forge his own image, and it reveals the promotional efforts of a city that also sought to be great.

1. Moore: Jack Dempsey in Tampa: Sports and Boosterism in the 1920s

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Jack Dempsey and B. L. Hamner posing at the champ’s exhibition bout in Tampa on February 4, 1926.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
At the time of his exhibition fights in Tampa, Dempsey had not, of course, assumed the cultural and even mythic stature he would later attain. His ultimate apotheosis would require a magical mix lacking then at least three key ingredients – his two losing battles with Gene Tunney, and time. In the second Tunney fight (September 22, 1927) he would display his tragic flaw, a curious but at the same time emotionally understandable inability to control the raw power his fans worshipped. Dempsey was representative of a new breed of American hero, an entertainment hero, not a statesman or military leader, as nineteenth-century American heroes had so often been. As a hero of consumption and not of production, he (like Ruth, with his home runs and Grange with his long touchdowns) provided simple solutions to difficult problems of victory in an increasingly complex society. Dempsey would eventually fall because, sadly, individual power was not enough, and because he could not adapt to Tunney’s cool, rational, scientific style. To hit his opponents until they dropped and then to hit them again as soon as or even before they stood erect had enabled Dempsey to triumph before, but the crude, old fashioned technique would thwart him against Tunney during the “long count” that spelled defeat but, much later, a higher glory for the “Manassa Mauler.”

In February 1926 Dempsey was possibly better liked by more fans than he had been when regularly fighting as a champion, although he had not fought an officially sanctioned title or non-title match since battering Firpo to the canvas in two frantic rounds on September 14, 1923, knocking the Argentinean down nine times and being punched and pushed from the ring himself once in a wild fight. But he was still far from the revered figure he would become, and he had to work hard to be liked. Two issues worked against his popularity. Dempsey was thought by many to have shirked his military obligations in World War I, and what may have been worse to some sports fans, he had failed since becoming champion to fight Harry Wills, perhaps his leading challenger – and not so coincidentally an African-American nicknamed the “Black Panther.”

Dempsey had not fought in the military during the war. Foolishly, his handlers had released a photograph of him in overalls holding a power tool, that appeared in newspapers across the country, suggesting he was laboring in a shipyard for the war effort. Actually, he was performing the meritorious job of recruiting defense workers. Dempsey’s shiny patent leather and suede shoes peeked out from under his trousers appearing to belie the photograph’s legitimacy, and scandal simmered. In 1920 Dempsey was tried on charges of conspiracy to avoid the draft, but his lawyers convinced the court of his innocence. Dempsey’s defense was that as sole support of his first wife, Maxine, his mother and father and some members of his family, he had been draft exempt; that he had contributed significantly to the war effort; and that he was trying to enlist in the Navy when the war ended. To many American boxing fans, his fight against Georges Carpentier, July 2, 1921, pitted a slacker against a French war hero. Dempsey’s court victory was for some jingoists no more effective in shining his image than his four-round knockout against the smaller, more fragile looking Carpentier would be, and the issue would linger to wound Dempsey for decades, until not long after Pearl Harbor when in his late forties, he joined the Coast Guard.

The charge that he had avoided fighting Wills was in 1926 far more frequently a subject of newspaper accounts, and more difficult for Dempsey to counter, since Dempsey had in fact just one day after defeating Jess Willard for the title July 4, 1919, announced he would under no circumstances pay attention to a “Negro challenger.” In fact, before he became champion,
Harry Wills (circa 1926) was denied a heavyweight title fight against Jack Dempsey.

Dempsey had fought blacks. The color line was drawn less firmly in prizefighting during the 1920s than in other sports, most notably baseball, but it seemed to grow more distinct as the weights of the fighters and the sizes of the purses they might earn increased. Heavyweights were the kings of sport, and the line was drawn most clearly in their division. In modern times only Jack Johnson had been a black heavyweight champion (1908-1915) and his carefree, outgoing, sometimes arrogant manner, his affairs with white women, but most of all his very blackness coupled with his dominance in the ring incensed many white fans. Any black fighting as a heavyweight had the double burden of his own blackness in a racist society, and the powerful, mocking image of Jack Johnson in white spectator’s minds to overcome. While many whites would doubtless have appreciated seeing Dempsey fight Wills, many others, including leery promoters and politicians subject to organized white pressure, were strongly opposed to the match. At times Dempsey appeared inclined to disavow his stated prescription against interracial fights, but a bout with Wills always seemed to become enmeshed in political wrangling outside his control.

Even with the slowly fading shadow of his non-participation in war to deal with and despite his three-year absence from a real fight and his seeming avoidance of a scrap with Wills, Dempsey was a national hero in 1926. “In France and England, Dempsey was received as a symbol of America,” according to biographer Randy Roberts.4 He was a “cultural hero”.5 In 1924, “without climbing into the ring, he earned more than any other professional athlete during that year.”6 Among athletes Babe Ruth would have been his only rival, and Ruth’s greatest season, when he hit his 60 home runs in 1927, still lay ahead of him. In short, Dempsey early in 1926 when he visited Florida was at a popularity peak. He was a dominating sports hero, and a charismatic figure in the public consciousness as well; even among Americans who never closely followed his fights, he was a celebrity.

Tampa Bay newspapers greatly publicized Dempsey. A detail such as “Jack’s Cafe Makes Money: Old Fighters Wash Dishes” in a small restaurant he owned briefly in Los Angeles was deemed worth printing in the Tampa Daily Tribune.7 His nose was a feature of minor controversy. Once flat, it had been straightened in 1924, Dempsey always claimed, simply so he could breathe more easily. Some fight fans and reporters suspected, however, that the operation was cosmetic or worse, aesthetic, to beautify his handsome but clearly battered mug. After all, he was now married to the Hollywood actress Estelle Taylor, and he had made several films during
his ring absence after the Firpo fight. A 1925 news story reported: “Dempsey Insists His Nose Is Real. Will Let Any One Twist It To Prove It Is Not Wax, He Says In Mexico.”8 His nose, doubtless far more famous than Cyrano de Bergerac’s among 1920s fight fans, would achieve a life of its own in sports columns and ring lore. In January 1926 the Tampa Tribune reported that Pie “Traynor To Get New Nose Like Dempsey’s,” in an item about the Pittsburgh Pirates’ third baseman, ultimately a member of baseball’s Hall of Fame.9

A garbled notice of Dempsey’s visit to Tampa appeared in the Tampa Morning Tribune on January 28, 1926, announcing that “Mr. and Mrs. Dempsey Will Come To Tampa For Visit Saturday.” Dempsey, accompanied by his wife, had been making public appearances in Miami, where he had trained but not fought any exhibitions, under the sponsorship of real estate entrepreneur J.S. Blain. Supposedly he had wired reservations to the Tampa Terrace Hotel, bringing “to an affirmative end rumors that have been prevalent during the last two weeks that the two would visit” Tampa, where “the champion will engage in no ring appearances.”10 The article was misleading. On January 28 the Dempseys shipped from Miami to Havana, to shop and possibly to arrange for exhibitions in Cuba that never took place.11

A more accurate report of the Dempseys’ visit to Tampa appeared in the Tribune on January 30, the day the champion was supposedly to arrive. Under a banner headline proclaiming “DEMPSEY TO APPEAR IN BOUT HERE WEDNESDAY” and adjacent to a smiling picture of Jack himself, an article revealed that Dempsey would fight six exhibition rounds against various sparring partners who would arrive from Miami. The B. L. Hamner company was promoting the appearance of the “Utah Mauler,” and no admission would be charged – that point was made quite clear.12

Hamner seemed confident the exhibition would take place. His organization distributed 25,000 tickets and constructed a ring “with as many seats being arranged as time will permit.... ‘Those who can’t find seats probably won’t mind standing up, when the attraction is the world’s heavyweight boxing champion,’” Harry Hester, Hamner’s liaison and supposedly Dempsey’s friend, stated. Arrangements were proceeding “to accommodate the largest crowd which ever attended a sports event in Tampa.” No one could mistake that “FANS WILL BE GUESTS OF HAMNER AT RING EXHIBITION BY CHAMP,” that the fight was free, or that to see the bout fans had only to drive “North from Tampa out Nebraska Avenue to Waters Avenue, then west approximately three quarters of a mile to the properties. Another route is the Armenia Avenue way, turning east on Waters Avenue. These routes will be thoroughly placarded . . . with directions to [the] scene of the bout.”13 In actuality, at the time this meant a fair drive to a sparsely settled near-wilderness.

The event would benefit everyone - the local newspapers who could offer their excited readers ample information about the hero Dempsey; the Hamner sales team who would reap rich publicity for their development and increased visibility as community builders; Dempsey who could demonstrate his brute power as a fighter, advertise his professional career (even as Hamner he could “drum up trade”), and enhance his image as a solid citizen; the spectators who would be seeing a famous athlete close up; and the city of Tampa, which would gain greater repute as a growing city of leisure activities and community expansion.
Hamner consistently represented Dempsey’s exhibition as a gift to the people of the city, an attempt to raise Tampa’s image of growth and achievement throughout the region, state, and country. This was a familiar attitude expressed by local land promoters, but perhaps none was more adept at the practice than B.L. Hamner, who was doubtless in large part profit oriented, but whose underlying sincerity also seems apparent. He was a gifted salesman who made and lost and remade again several fortunes from selling or developing land during his almost half-a-century of work in the region, but who also consistently expressed a vision of Tampa as an important city. He was not alone in this vision among Tampa realtors, but his advertisements show him to have been more imaginatively grand and insistent in his vision than all but a few competitors.

In his first newspaper advertisement for the exhibition matches Hamner proudly proclaimed that “In presenting Jack Dempsey, world’s heavyweight boxing champion, in a free boxing exhibition at Tampa’s North Side Country Club on Wednesday afternoon, B.L. Hamner and his associates in the B.L. Hamner Organization are going forward in accordance with their desire to build a greater and finer city.”

Hamner’s next advertisement combined his social zeal, his dreams for a greater Tampa, with claims promoting the advantages of the development he owned – in that order – to produce an almost inspirational explanation of his motives for arranging the proposed free bout. “In arranging for the appearance of the boxing champion, B.L. Hamner and his associates had a three-fold purpose – first, to gratify the public interest in Dempsey – second, to further Tampa’s fame as a resort and an amusement center – and third to acquaint folks with the beauties and advantages of Tampa’s North Side Country Club Area,” where the exhibition would take place.

Hamner, like many Tampans in the growing city, was not a Tampa native. Born in Kansas City, Missouri, on August 3, 1882, he practiced law there for several years after receiving his L.L.B. He came to Tampa around 1911 or 1912, and soon became known as a highly successful real estate entrepreneur, as did his brothers Harry and William, who had moved to the area with him. According to a “Builders of Tampa” article in the *Tampa Tribune*, he was “always active and enterprising.” He had “headed some of the principal real estate and development enterprises in this city and vicinity,” including the “noteworthy suburb” of Temple Terrace, and, the article stated, originally owned what would become known as Davis Islands, one of the most distinctive residential enclaves in the city, a regionally famous development that would come to feature Mediterranean revival buildings situated on land much of which was dredged up from surrounding Tampa Bay. “It is no secret that it was Burks Hamner who first visioned the possibilities of the islands in the bay as a scene of epochal development and it is stated that he imparted to D.P. Davis the outlines of the idea which has resulted in the wonderful Davis Islands of today.”

According to his nephew, Joseph Burks Hamner Miller, B.L. Hamner sold the islands to Davis when he realized the development would take more time and effort than he wished to expend. Viewed as more than a successful businessman, Hamner was also hailed in the *Tribune’s “Builders of Tampa” as the type of urban leader, though no politician, who was “Always... active in community and civic work.” A “booster for Tampa,” he “urg[ed] upon citizens greater attention to those things which make a real City.” Like many salesmen, he possessed an easy, charming way with colleagues, customers and friends, whether men or women, but according to his nephew he did not like partners and felt more comfortable with just himself in charge of his projects: he was not a team player.
Hamner maintained throughout his long career a grand vision of sales linked with community growth. Not content with fielding stray clients attracted to his enterprises, he attempted various devices – like the Dempsey promotion – to lure larger numbers of potential clients to contemplate his dream suburbs. Some of the spectators who attended the Dempsey exhibition were brought to Tampa in buses Hamner chartered for prospects in cities such as New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, not expressly so they could see the fight, but so they might be enticed to buy property in his Forest Hills development, one of whose slogans created by Hamner was “Sooner or later all the people will take to the hills!”

Hamner’s advertisements consistently stressed his grand dreams for the region and combined commercial appeal with a merchant’s concept of visionary and intellectual discourse to attract customers. “Have Faith in Tampa – work morning, noon and night” one of his Tribune advertisements proclaimed in 1926 with the stated purpose being “to realize our vision – a million people in nineteen thirty six.” He labeled select samples of his homiletic newspaper copy an “Aditorial.” One was subtitled “Knowledge,” another “Opportunity.” “Truth” announced that “Five hundred and fifty-one years before the coming of Christ, Confucius said ‘the absolute truth is indestructible....’ Why, therefore, should we be disturbed at silly tales in the North about Florida?” And so just as Christ and Confucius seemed somehow to be enlisted in his sales force, Jack Dempsey soon would be. “Red” Grange and his manager Charles C. C. (“Cash & Carry”) Pyle had already been recruited. Newspapers announced that each had submitted a $1,000 down payment on “more than $15,000.00 worth of property in Tampa’s North Side Country Club area,” not long after Grange had played a professional game with his recently-joined Chicago Bears team on New Years Day, against a squad that included Jim Thorpe.

When Dempsey arrived in Tampa, the city was experiencing one of its sporadic boom periods. The same 1926 issue of the Tampa Morning Tribune, explicating how Confucius’s wisdom might advocate investment in local real estate, announced in a regular news item (not an advertisement) “AMPLE ASSURANCE FOR CONTINUED PROSPERITY” in the region. As proof of this claim the article stated that “as a seaport Tampa ranks seventh in importance among the country’s many great ports.” The newspaper’s headline for the day was even more enthusiastic: “TAMPA TURNS TO NEW CONQUESTS. GOLDEN YEAR ENDS WITH CITY HOLDING GREATEST LAURELS,” one of which was the Tribune’s own ranking of “Twelfth Among Newspapers Of Nation In Advertising Volume.”

In the month prior to Dempsey’s visit, local realty sales hit $24,000,000, and a record number of building projects had been started. Not far from Tampa, satellite community developments were burgeoning: Homosassa, “a tailor-made city now under construction”; Zolfo Springs, “an established town”; the aristocratic sounding “Nobelton . . . on the high, tree-shadowed banks of the Withlacoochee River”; and Dunedin Isles, a “complete Development” with “Every Convenience and Advantage,” where “$780 and no more pays in full for house and lot” on a “High-Dry Full Sized 50 X 100 ft.” parcel of land.

A growing community with big ideas about itself awaited Dempsey, and the city’s sporting fraternity greedily received any bits of publicity about the champion. Though his biographer, Randy Roberts, asserts that “by 1926, it was painfully obvious to everyone connected with the
pseudopromotion that the [Wills] fight would never be held,” the Tampa Morning Tribune for January was liberally seeded with conjectures about Dempsey, his future, and his next opponent: “Dempsey Writes He Wants To Meet Wills and Gene; Ready to Talk Business”; “Two Million Is Bid For Dempsey Battle Against Harry Wills”; “Dempsey Promises Los Angeles Wills Battle If Fitzsimmons [promotion] Fails”; “Tunney To Meet Dempsey In September Is Belief Of Promoters And Fans.” Dempsey’s future opponent seemed to change almost daily. More significant to Tampans was that he was going to fight in Tampa!

Advance news of his schedule contained much misinformation, but fancy and fact blended smoothly into instant publicity, which was partly what both Hamner and Dempsey sought, for both had products to sell. Dempsey was marketing himself, his legitimacy as a champion, and his substantiality as a person. Hamner was selling property, a stake in the community, and like many good developers he also sought to sell himself and his legitimacy as a progressive citizen. Both had an eye on the future. Dempsey wished to meet big-time opponents for large purses, but he also wanted to appear in or produce more films and so needed to be respected not simply as a “pug.” Hamner had many other projects in mind, and visions of greatness for Tampa that would also enhance his projects. Each man could make use of the other in pursuing his dreams.

The Forest Hills Golf and Country Club, shown in 1926, burned down in the late 1960s after it had been abandoned.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
On Tuesday, February 2, the *Tampa Morning Tribune* announced that Dempsey expected “to remain in this city until Saturday,” that he would “be feted on several occasions” and that he would be “guest of honor” at several entertainments now being arranged by Harvey Hester. The *Tribune* said Dempsey had written Harvey Hester that “Having never appeared in a Florida ring [he was ignoring or forgetting previous exhibitions in Pensacola and Jacksonville] . . . I naturally, will be anxious to be at my best. Although it will only be an exhibition, I expect to travel at a fast rate.” How the fans must have thrilled at that: Dempsey, at a fast rate in *Tampa*! The *Tribune* added erroneously that he had never “appeared in a bout in the south.” He had in fact battled at least three times below the Mason-Dixon line, knocking out Fred Saddy in one round, at Memphis, on February 25, 1918; Dan “Porky” Flynn in one round on July 6, 1918 at Atlanta; and Dutch Seifert also in one round (exhibition) on February 10, 1925, also at Atlanta: three fights, three rounds, a fair display of Dempsey’s power.

Across Tampa Bay, Tampa’s rivalrous sister city during boom and bust years, St. Petersburg received notice of his local appearance at first in a somewhat snide and then reserved fashion. The *St. Petersburg Times* reprinted under a picture of Dempsey, the regionally syndicated “Sports Done Brown” column, which warned that Jack’s three years of official idleness could produce the same malaise that Brown claimed defeated heavyweight champions John L. Sullivan, Jim Jeffries, and Jess Willard. Dempsey, a *Times* reporter added quietly, was “scheduled to box three rounds at a Tampa realtor’s subdivision on Wednesday afternoon and will probably attract quite a few local fans.”

In Tampa, the colorful, charming booster and salesman B.L. Hamner was fully exploiting the local fans’ interest in the event he had organized. Anticipating Dempsey’s vision of the development that would surround the ring he would fight within, a Hamner advertisement glowingly described the terrain now christened “Point O’Glory.” Dempsey would see “two thousand acres of rolling hills, covered with beautiful woods and dotted with lovely lakes, being prepared as an incomparable setting for suburban homes. He will see construction forces at work on wide boulevards, concrete sidewalks and other improvements. He will see two partially completed club-houses. He will see homes – eight in Golfland, opened less than two weeks ago, being built.” A drive through the region today reveals that Hamner’s lyrical description, considering it was advertising copy, did not greatly distort the region’s attractiveness. Although most of Tampa is flat as the stretched canvas of a boxing ring, in the Forest Hills section where Hamner’s land was located, some small hills tumble if not roll, and the land is dotted with lovely, though often over-developed and occasionally polluted lakes. Streets still wind among wooded areas and do not follow the rigid grid of many Tampa suburbs, partly because the roads that often curve pleasantly through the neighborhood seem to flow about an irregularly shaped old golf course built, by Hamner and running north-south through what was once his subdivision.

Other local entrepreneurs were also ready to exploit Dempsey’s potent name to enhance the legitimacy or value of their projects. During the 1920s the fortunes of film enterprises locally and in the state had waned, unlike the real estate industry. Prior to World War I, Florida rivaled and sometimes surpassed California in its filming activities. Dempsey’s name and that of his actress wife’s were employed by a Tampa company making one of the periodic attempts in the region to reestablish film making as a fiscally strong local business.
Dempsey’s celebrity status as heavyweight champion was his main attraction to local movie producers, who also undoubtedly knew that he had made a number of films and was interested in developing film properties. Of course Estelle Taylor was an authentic stage and film actress, sometimes a leading lady if never a brightly shining star whose lustre was enhanced by her connection to Dempsey. Her most popular films included “A Fool There Was” (1922) and “Don Juan” (1926), with dashing, unreliable John Barrymore. Dempsey was a bigger attraction than his wife by far – in the Broadway play “The Big Fight,” directed by David Belasco, he had commanded (briefly) $1,250 a week and Taylor only $350. But she was still a valuable added attraction. An advertisement and a news article printed in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* trumpeted the grand plans of film promoters – “12 Tampa men and a group of New York capitalists” – for the city: “Don’t Crowd, Girls, You’ll All Get Screen Test For Film Job At Movie Ball.” Who could resist the lure? “Movie aspirants, your chance is here! At the Coliseum tomorrow night, R.H. Allison, personal representative of the Chester Beecroft Company, Inc., will select 250 girls and 250 men to take screen tests for the filming of the Gasparilla motion picture” to be shot locally. “Jack Dempsey and Estelle Taylor have been invited to help in the selections and in entertaining the large crowds expected.”

The Beecroft Company’s proposed filming scheme, as lofty in its design as Hamner’s real estate development, was destined for failure. Certainly the cast sought for the movie about Tampa’s legendary, ersatz pirate Jose Gaspar, whose name designated the city’s annual Mardi Gras-type Gasparilla Day festival, was a solid one, including “Harrison Ford for leading male role, Niles Welch for second, Betty Bronson for supporting role,” and either John Robertson or Alberta Parke as director. Tampa’s city commission, eager for the fame and fortune a big-time film could bring to its community, “granted the right to film scenes anywhere in the city, and has assigned 10 policemen to help with the mob scenes.” The dreamed of mobs never materialized, just as the envisioned film was never shot, although the fabulous movie ball preparing for it took place, costing gentlemen just $1.10 and ladies only .50¢ (children .25¢). Jack Dempsey along with his wife was a shining symbol of the fantasy of great wealth and success the film represented, as a glamorous photograph of him in the advertisement suggested, with his hair slicked back like Rudolf Valentino’s or Ramon Novarro’s.

The Tampa advertisement said only that Dempsey and Taylor “have been invited” to the movie ball. The *St. Petersburg Times* the same day was more explicit, “Ball At Davis Island Planned. Jack Dempsey And Wife To Be There For Selecting Movie Players.” The *Tribune*’s previous day’s report had said “girls” and “men” would be selected for screen tests for the proposed Gasparilla film, but the *Times* account claimed that Dempsey and Taylor would aid Beecroft’s representative “in completing arrangements for enrolling extras and ‘bit part’ players from the region.” The *Times* article also contained verisimilitude convincing enough to stimulate the most prosaic of imaginations concerning the reality of the proposed film’s future. John L.R. Pell, the author of *Down to the Sea in Ships* was scheduled to write continuity for the proposed extravaganza, spinning a yarn “about the thrilling attempt to purloin the jewels of the famed pirate chief Gasparilla.” So not only would Jack Dempsey fight in Tampa, drawing tens of thousands to wander among Hamner’s “Points O’Glory,” but he and his Hollywood actress wife would supposedly reign at a movie ball that according to the *Times* would ultimately blossom into “a stupendous spectacle with multitudes of fair attendants and processions with gorgeously
Jack Dempsey and his wife Estelle Taylor.

Photograph from *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler*, by Randy Roberts.
gowned retinues. . . .one of the greatest advertisements for Tampa, the west coast, and even the state of Florida.”

No record exists that either Dempsey or his wife attended the ball, or that the Gasparilla film was ever shot. Not all Tampa dreams materialized. Beecroft's did not, though Hamner’s would.

In the real world distinct from newspaper speculation and promoters’ wishes, a nauseous Dempsey arrived at Key West on Tuesday, February 2, aboard the steamship Cuba en route to Tampa. Confined to his stateroom because of seasickness incurred during the crossing from Havana, Dempsey nonetheless on that day gave an interview to the Key West Morning Call, that was published nationwide by numbers of newspapers including the St. Petersburg Times and the New York Times. Using what must have seemed a surefire technique for drumming up interest in his imminent exhibition scrap in Tampa and for his greater future fortunes, Dempsey told the Key West reporters, “Fellows, I am going to give you a ‘scoop.’ . . . I’m going to fight Harry Wills on Labor Day.” Dempsey further revealed that “the place where this much talked about title match will be held has not been decided upon,” but he speculated it might even take place in Tex Rickard’s own Madison Square Garden. Dempsey proclaimed he was in great shape, certainly good enough to “enter the ring with either Wills or Tunney,” and further “expressed the belief he would meet Tunney during the year,” presumably after he beat Wills. Demonstrating superb confidence despite his queasy stomach, Dempsey finally announced he considered Jack League, one of his sparring partners with whom he would box in Tampa, “the most logical successor for a world heavyweight title. ‘That boy sure packs an awful wallop,’ Dempsey said. ‘I believe he could beat either Wills or Tunney.’”

In this self-assured fashion, Dempsey advertised his Tampa exhibition and neatly manipulated the press, securing newspaper space across the country for what was essentially a non-news item that evoked still further commentary. The next day, for example, the New York Times reprinted Dempsey’s claims about fighting Wills and added the additional non-news that Tex Rickard “characterized as ‘ridiculous’ Dempsey’s statements. Dempsey is ‘kidding somebody’ the promoter commented.” Possibly Rickard felt Dempsey was being manipulated by his actress wife. Estelle had clearly helped create a rift between Jack and some of his old friends, notably his ex-manager “Doc” Kearns, who said she told the champion to choose “either him [Kearns] or me.” In fact, Dempsey would later claim that Estelle Taylor definitely did not want him to fight Wills, whom she called “that glass-jawed nigger.” Naturally, this information did not appear in the newspapers.

Wednesday, February 3, 1926, was the big day of Dempsey’s arrival in Tampa. The Tampa Morning Tribune used the Key West story circulated by the Associated Press as an excuse to stretch the headline “DEMPSEY SAYS HE’LL FIGHT WILLS LABOR DAY” completely across the top of its first sports page. The Tribune also stated that Dempsey “expected a telegram when he arrived in Tampa giving him information as to the city in which the [unnamed] promoter proposes to stage the [Wills] fight.” On the same page the Tribune printed another AP release reporting “RICKARD GRILLED ON TUNNEY BOUT; BUT WON’T TALK.” In New York, the state athletic commission was investigating whether or not Tex Rickard had signed anybody to fight Dempsey “in violation of the commission’s edict against the champion. Rickard refused to answer on the ground that any statement on his part would be embarrassing to his
business affairs.” Asked what kind of discipline the commission would impose on Rickard if it found evidence of his wrongdoing, chairman Jim Farley equivocated “we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

The foolishly tumultuous matter seemed highly speculative, but controversy only added more spice to the news about Dempsey’s plans.

It is doubtful that Dempsey needed much more publicity in Tampa. On February 3, the Tampa Morning Tribune reported that an additional 10,000 pasteboards had been ordered to supplement the “practically exhausted . . . initial supply of 25,000 free tickets.” Another even lengthier article about the day’s exhibition flanked a file photograph of Dempsey sparring with the British heavyweight “Bombardier” Billy Wells taken when Jack was training for the Gibbons match in 1923. Thus, a quick left-to-right scan of the Tribune’s lead sports page revealed stories or pictures of Dempsey’s present, past, and future, respectively. The article claimed that “Dempsey’s Drawing Power To Be Put To Unique Test When Fans Are Passed Free” in Tampa. While “90,000 paid a tremendous price to see Jack the Giant Killer pound Georges Carpentier . . . into submission” in 1921, this time Dempsey would be watched free of cost, “probably . . . the first time a heavyweight champion has ever appeared in a public exhibition without some admission cost.” Careful directions were also supplied in the story, for the space in which the fight would take place was formerly an open field “several miles north of Tampa out Nebraska or Armenia avenues. . . . The scene of the bout will be easily recognized, as Harnar men have thoroughly placarded the routes” for the expected 25,000 fans.

Surviving photographs show the fight was staged at an isolated make-shift site. The temporary ring stood above a banner declaring “JACK DEMPSEY Complimentary Boxing Exhibition.” Ten or twenty rows of seated spectators surrounded the ring, but thousands more stood around. A platform with photographers was raised above the crowd, and a few kids perched in the trees that formed a constraining perimeter for the spectators. The land in the photographs looks absolutely flat, devoid of rolling hills. No houses appear in the distant landscape, only forest, with a few spindly, tall pines, and some cypresses suggesting low, damp soil.

The competing newspapers from rivalrous sister cities Tampa and St. Petersburg reported the day’s events somewhat differently. The St. Petersburg Times commentary was relatively brief, understated and almost cynical. Accompanying the article was a small photograph of Dempsey grinning genially, sitting in an open convertible with his “Florida manager Eddie Conner” and Estelle Taylor, whose smile seems forced if not slightly bilious. Six brief paragraphs related that Dempsey had “entertained a crowd of several thousand fistic fans in an exhibition with one of his sparring partners in a ring set up on an allotment some distance from the city, the free attraction being a means of advertising the subdivision.” The item then revealed that Estelle spent most of the day in her hotel suite because she had not “recovered from her seasickness yet” (probably the reason for her pasty expression). “Dempsey pleasantly posed for the Times’ photographers,” the paper suggested, because “it has been these many months since he missed an opportunity to crack open some additional publicity.” The Times mentioned Dempsey’s statements about fighting Wills on Labor Day, together with Rickard’s charges ridiculing his remarks, but implied that this hoopla “may be merely the means of additional publicity.” “A fellow,” the article sarcastically concluded, “must keep his name before the public some way or another.”
On February 4 the *Tampa Morning Tribune* featured two articles on page one about Dempsey’s visit. Underneath a loving picture of Estelle Taylor nestled close to her husband, the lengthy items that were continued in the paper’s interior pages extolled Dempsey as a personality, man, and champion. The *Tribune* photograph was twice the size of the *Times*’ picture. One article, written by a woman reporter, Rose Lack, presented a more domestic view of Dempsey, though it concluded with a fair-minded declaration by the champion of his willingness to fight Harry Wills. The story opened prosaically enough: “Yesterday I went to the Tampa Bay hotel to meet Jack Dempsey, the Fighter.” Immediately, however, Lack gushed, “But I left, after the interview, an admirer of Jack Dempsey, the Man, and Jack Dempsey, the Husband.” The husband was, according to his wife, slightly impractical, having badly designed a box-like house the couple was planning in California, and for which the Dempseys had reportedly bought marble in Cuba during their recent visit there. But he was also loving, frequently using “affectionate terms” to address Mrs. Dempsey, according to Lack, and understanding enough to support his wife’s decision not to give up her career. Dempsey was willing for her to combine work with marriage, Lack stated. To demand otherwise, Dempsey observed, would have been “as unfair . . . as . . . for her to want me to stop boxing.”

Rose Lack portrayed Dempsey as an idealistic and competitive fighter, emphasizing his aesthetic interest in the sport rather than the brutality for which he was famous. Though he had
“the flattened nose of the pugilist . . . his voice [was] soft and musical, unusually so for a big man. He dresses immaculately in the latest style, and his hair is slicked back in the most approved ‘jelly’ fashion.” Dempsey “the Man” and Dempsey “the Fighter” were both articulate, and hard to distinguish between, as reported by the Tribune’s writer. “To do one’s best, there has to be an intense love of the work, and a desire to accomplish a goal,” the “Man” said, and the “Fighter” claimed in a similar fashion, with “an eager light” shining in his eyes, that money was not his goal. “It isn’t that I’m in the game for what I can make; I’m in it because I love it, because it makes my life’s ambition come true to me,” though “naturally,” he admitted “as long as it is my work I cash in on it.” However, “boxing is an art to me just as acting is to Mrs. Dempsey.”

Although Dempsey diplomatically declared that Cuba was “one of the most beautiful places” he and his wife had ever visited, he also prudently admitted that he had “refused to fight” there “because they couldn’t pay him enough.” Though “impractical” as a husband (an acceptable stereotype for a wealthy consumer able to spend conspicuously), he was otherwise portrayed as a substantial citizen, planning for example “to go into the producing end” of films that appealed to him more than acting. He was shown as a man of varied possessions, holding interest in “coal mines, hotels and restaurants.” Since the article also related that when he began boxing he was “barely getting paid for what I did,” his accomplishments underscored for the public his rags-to-riches climb, in the best tradition of the American dream of success.

Rose Lack presented Dempsey as a model American – affable, genial trying to be funny (“I might weigh a little less since that boat trip”), thoughtful, supportive, successful, many-sided, and, finally, fair-minded. As a “slave of the public,” just like “actresses, physicians, newspapermen,” he added graciously, he was destined to carry out the public’s wishes. He diplomatically explained his feelings about fighting Wills, in such a way that would offer some salve to both those who wanted him to fight the “Black Panther” who many still thought would be his most formidable opponent, and those racists who desired him to maintain the color line.

His use of “suppose” implied reluctance, but then Dempsey added, “It’s not a question of race or color, likes or dislikes, but of ability against ability. If he’s the best, then I want to meet him because I want to compete with the best.” The American spirit of fair play would triumph if he fought Wills.

The other page-one story in the Tribune was no less complimentary though it generally remained strictly on the topic of Dempsey the fighter. In presenting details of Dempsey’s proposed fight with Wills, called “the darkest shadow on Jack’s championship career during the last two or three years,” reporter Marvin McCarthy still emphasized the idea that Dempsey was also a serious, big businessman. “It will be a percentage proposition,” he says of the Wills fight, “although Floyd [Fitzsimmons] will put up $500,000 as a guarantee of his ability to go through with the bout.” Dempsey was also genial, joking about his voyage to Tampa that proved “that I am not a sailor . . . . I felt like a bird in a cage all the way over from Havana, and I felt giddy enough to fly.” But mainly McCarthy extolled Dempsey’s great physical shape and animalistic fighting ability. He reported that ten thousand men, women, and children – a few kids at ringside but many holding tightly to “precarious perches in swaying tree-tops” – watched Dempsey belie
reports that he was “not in condition” as he “emerged from his bathrobe a slender-hipped, broad-shouldered leopard of a man.”

McCarthy’s description recaptured the primal, feral qualities that probably accounted for Dempsey’s fantastic appeal among millions of Americans, many of whom did not root for him as a fighter for any number of reasons – his war record for instance. Even those who considered him essentially an unskilled ex-bum who had clobbered his way to the top of boxing’s heap, might be mesmerized by the fierce power he could exhibit in the ring in a flash, a power that could apparently be glimpsed though in a veiled form in his Tampa exhibitions. “There is something magnetic about Dempsey’s expression as he goes into action,” McCarthy declared. “One almost forgets to watch the lithe movements of the man, or the dismay of his opponent as Jack wades in with his famed left hook snaking in and out like a rapier.”

Dempsey fought two rounds with Joe Lavigne, announced as “the heavyweight champion of Oregon . . . when Dempsey is not in the state” by referee and Hamner company salesman Harvey Hester. Dropping his opponent to the canvas several times, Dempsey permitted Lavigne to last until the final bell because he did not “care to add” the Oregon championship “to his collection.” He was also “most courteous” to Lavigne, picking him up once, shaking him until his glassy eyes cleared, and telling him “that’s all right, fellow. Now you can finish your bout.”

Jack League, Dempsey’s next sparring partner, “was the only one of the quartet of opponents who did not feel the force of a typical Jack Dempsey blow,” according to the Tribune reporter, although in the second round Dempsey “clipped [him] on the chin” and dropped him “to his knees for a second or two.” Dempsey praised League as “a youngster who may be heard from in boxing before long. . . . He is one of the best men I have met – in either an exhibition or a real bout – in a long time.” League was Dempsey’s protege, so his praise of the otherwise undistinguished club fighter was based on a sympathetic if not completely trustworthy or accurate appraisal of his potential. While in Tampa, Dempsey began arrangements for League to fight a real bout there which, as much as League’s skill, might explain why none of Dempsey’s most forceful swipes at his jaw ever connected.

Ed Warner, the smallest of the afternoon’s opponents, then sped two rounds with Dempsey, followed by Marty Cutler, “a big, rotund sort of battler,” who for a round served as a foil for Dempsey’s demonstration “of various punches” and “the Dempsey shift. . . a queer sort of a motion, brought about when the champion winds himself up like a top, unwinds, re-coils and then strikes like a flivver crank running wild.” Cutler acted the supporting role of punching bag with competence until “Dempsey demonstrated on [his] ample abdomen” with a right hook. “Marty lost his temper and started swinging rights and lefts at the champion. Jack went into his shift and pumped Cutler through the ropes with a smashing blow to the body. Marty was sending out frantic SOS calls for help as attendants rushed to extricate him from the crowd of ringsiders.” No one suggested that the outburst – in some ways a recreation of Dempsey’s famous trip through the ropes in his fight against Firpo – was staged. Rather, the crowd seemed greatly pleased at the afternoon’s dramatic conclusion.

If Dempsey was the star of the day, B.L. Hamner was the star producer. He had successfully promoted an interesting afternoon of scrapping that featured one, of the country’s most famous
sports stars and arguably the world’s best known athlete. A photograph depicting Jack Dempsey with Hamner accompanied the fight’s report in the Tribune. Yet another article the same day announced that a fight card scheduled for Friday night would be moved up to Thursday to accommodate Dempsey – who agreed to attend – and several of his sparring partners, who were to participate. Dempsey would appear with his wife, “B.L. Hamner, of the North Side Country Club area, and other members of the firm. It was Mr. Hamner who arranged for the champion’s appearance here yesterday [Wednesday, February 3, 1926]. The party will have a special ringside box. Jack Dempsey will be introduced to the fans during the evening by Harvey Hester, referee, and for several years a traveling companion of the champion.” Clearly Hester’s past relationship with Dempsey was blossoming in retrospect as Dempsey lingered in Tampa. “Hester went on a tour with Jack several years ago. He is to referee the bouts tonight.”

Dempsey’s visit surely brought private joys to Hamner, along with the public recognition he received. We can only guess at the pleasure he experienced at the “fete” he hosted for Dempsey and his wife the evening of Wednesday, February 3, at Temple Terrace’s Club Morocco, by its own proclamation “The South’s Most Distinctive Dining and Dancing Rendezvous.” Doubtless Hamner’s party watched “The Club Morocco Revue” with its “New York and Paris artists.” Probably Hamner picked up the tab for the Club’s announced “couvert charge,” and everyone must have gabbled about the car loads and buses of tourists and native Tampans who had flocked
to his project to see Dempsey and also view “Points O’Glory’s” wooded groves and rolling hills.

Though Dempsey was not greatly richer or better known because of his visit to Tampa, he had gained by it. He publicized himself by stirring up once more the chance that he might fight Harry Wills. He whetted the fans’ appetite for a real fight with Wills or Tunney. He conducted himself diplomatically with the Hamner organization, the Tampa fans, and the region’s newspapers; he appeared as a respectable, business-like, friendly man who was also a prize fighter in tip-top shape and in control of his own destiny. The local newspaper accounts suggest that Dempsey demonstrated what a fine, solid, amiable, respectable fellow and businessman he really was. And Tampa, as the *Tribune* editorial shows, felt itself basking in Dempsey’s light.

So small a matter as the agreement Dempsey reached with local promoter Jim Downing for Jack League to meet the Canadian Champion Jack Renault “within the next two months” appeared newsworthy at least within the state. His confidence and good spirits seemed always on display. Wherever he appeared crowds gathered.

At the fight he attended at Benjamin Field on Thursday, February 4, he “expressed his delight in being in Tampa and voiced a desire to appear in a real bout here at some later time.”

The crowd of spectators included a number of boys perched in trees.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
crowd of 4,500 roared its approval. The fans loved him. He played them as beautifully as he had
the press. He insisted to a ringside reporter “that he will fight Wills in September,” and when
asked about Tex Rickard he replied, “There is no wonder he denies that I will fight Wills. . . for
he knows nothing whatsoever of my plans.” Earlier, photographed playing golf at one of the
area’s fine courses displaying in the middle of winter the pleasures of Florida to untold potential
tourists, Dempsey had joked that he would not mind “taking Tunney on in golf,” but at the same
time intimated “that he didn’t think a whole lot of Gene’s fistic capabilities,” even though he
thought Gene “plays a pretty fair golf game.”

Estelle Taylor stood by her husband the champion as he spoke in the ring at the Benjamin Field
fights, though she did not speak herself: a paradigm of supportive and decorative wifely
responsibility, she “was given a bouquet of roses by admirers.” After the eighth round of the
night’s main event between Marine Tolliver and Buck Aston, the loving husband and wife left
Tampa for Memphis, where on February 8 Dempsey knocked out four fighters including Jack
League, in one round each.

Even after he left Florida to continue his triumphal tour of the southern hustings prior to
reemerging in the great world of major league prizefighting and promotion, an afterglow of his
visit to the region flared occasionally to light. In Miami his screen image appeared in the service

B. L. Hamner (left) posing with Dempsey and referee Harvey Hester.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
of commerce once again in “Free Movies Tonight. Jack Dempsey In Action. J.S. Blain Invites You To See The World’s Champion In His First Florida Workout: 3 Shows – 7-8 and 9 p.m. At J.S. Blain’s Sales Office.” Once more he was selling land in the state and maintaining interest in himself, though he was no longer present in person.

Sometimes the shine of his local fame was slightly tarnished. His protege Jack League was knocked out by Jack Renault in Tampa on February 26. Remembering Dempsey’s appraisal of League’s possible future, one reporter cynically commented “if he’s the next champion, them I’m the last.” But the fight drew approximately 10,000 spectators, far more than it would have had Dempsey not been League’s sponsor. Disappointment in Dempsey’s protege did not in any way diminish the interest local fans and newspapers lavished on the champion. His next opponent remained a matter of constant interest. But whomever he fought, it was Dempsey who commanded the fans’ attention. Tunney and Wills seemed incidental to him. He was the champ, he was the best.

Dempsey did not of course change Florida by his visit there nor did Florida change him. The regions he toured would grow into major urban areas but not because of his intervention. The cheers Dempsey heard in Miami and more loudly in Tampa probably did not last long in his
memories. The exhibitions he fought in Tampa never became part of his official record, as about forty of his other exhibition matches would.

Several photographs taken by the region’s premier commercial photographic firm, Burgert Brothers, exist of the famous day Jack Dempsey came to Tampa. One shows the smiling, vital, confident champion shaking hands – his are encased in boxing gloves – with slightly balding, handsome, happy, assured, confident B.L. Hamner. Dempsey wears a tank top and fighting togs, Hamner a business suit. A ringpost in the background is covered, as were all the ringposts that afternoon, with an American flag banner. The picture graphically portrays the cozy, friendly relationship between American sport and business, both acting in league to sell each other. Sport enhances – or exploits – business, which in turn enhances – or exploits – sports. Hamner and Dempsey gave a kind of credibility, a visibility, to each other. Dempsey’s visit to Florida in 1926 demonstrates how sports and business could operate literally and metaphorically hand in glove. Dempsey used, perhaps manipulated, the press in the state to provide him with an even greater audience, to intensify the reputation of his prowess, and to establish himself in the public mind not merely as a brutal, animalistic fighter, but as an American citizen who might be liked or respected for carrying out the duties of a citizen – he was presented as a happily married man, as a businessman, as a friend to the community.

B.L. Hamner presented Dempsey as a gift to the public, but in doing so also associated him with community-building enterprises. Hamner was specifically praised for employing Dempsey to spread the fame of Tampa. Jack Dempsey in Florida offers a classic example of sport, business, and community operating together to form a booster network whose interconnected strands seemed to enhance all partners engaged in a mutual enterprise, while attracting and delighting the masses of people – citizens and consumers – these partners gathered in their net.

1 Tampa Morning Tribune and St. Petersburg Times, February 4, 1926.

2 I am very clearly indebted in my discussion of sports heroes in general and Dempsey in particular, to concepts and terms from Benjamin Rader’s American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1983), and his article “Contemporary Sport Heroes: Ruth Grange, and Dempsey,” in Journal of Popular Culture (Spring 1983): 11-24. My reliance upon Randy Roberts’s excellent Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), for general facts, authentic opinions, and informed analyses will be apparent to anyone who has read that text.

3 Roberts, Jack Dempsey, 64.

4 Ibid., 134.

5 Ibid., 113.

6 Ibid., 202.

7 Tampa Morning Tribune, January 23, 1926.

8 Ibid, October 28, 1925.

9 Ibid., January 3, 1926.

10 Ibid., January 28, 1926.


Tampa Morning Tribune, January 20, 1926.

Ibid.

Ibid., January 31, 1926.

Ibid., February 1, 1926.

Ibid., February 18, 1926.

Ibid., February 18, 1926.

I am greatly indebted for many facts and details about Hamner to his nephew, Joseph Burks Hamner Miller, a Tampa realtor who shares his uncle’s vision of a growing city. I interviewed Mr. Miller for the first time June 8, 1988, and subsequently was able to check a number of details with him. Mr. Miller was born in Reno, Nevada, May 11, 1909, but moved to the Tampa region in 1911. His mother was a Hamner.

Tampa Morning Tribune, February 18, 1926.

Ibid., January 2, 1926.

Ibid., January 7, 1926.

Ibid., January 3, 1926.

Ibid., January 7, 1926.

Ibid., January 31, 1926.

Roberts, Jack Dempsey, 213; Tampa Morning Tribune, January 3, 12, 16, 25, 1926.

Tampa Morning Tribune, February 2, 1926.

Standard records, for example The Ring Record Book, also indicate Dempsey fought an exhibition in Pensacola, and possibly in Jacksonville, in 1924. Roberts, Jack Dempsey, 194-95.

St. Petersburg Times, February 2, 1926.

Tampa Morning Tribune, February 2, 1926.


Tampa Morning Tribune, February 2, 1926.

Ibid.

St. Petersburg Times, February 2, 1926.


36 Demsey and Stearns, *Round by Round*, 171, 179.

37 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 3, 1926.

38 Ibid.

39 *St. Petersburg Times*, February 4, 1926.

40 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 4, 1926.

41 Ibid. See also ibid., January 12, 1926, for A Club Morocco advertisement.

42 *Miami Herald*, February 4, 1926.

43 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 5, 1926.

44 *Miami Herald*, February 10, 1926.

45 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 27, 1926.