



# Mount Clemens Public Library

## Local History Sketches

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### John L. Sullivan and the “Battle of the Cemetery”

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During the heyday of the bath houses, Mount Clemens was a popular destination for professional boxers who found the mineral waters a beneficial part of their training programs. Among those who visited here regularly was the great **John L. Sullivan**, the last of the bare-knuckle boxing champions, who was known during his career as the "Boston Strong Boy." Others would train in Mount Clemens as well, including, in later years, **Jack Dempsey**, but John L. Sullivan left a lasting impression on the local citizens that would be remembered vividly half a century later.

In 1935, long-time residents recounted to the *Mount Clemens Monitor* their recollections of an impromptu boxing match between John L. Sullivan and a local man named **George Roessel**. While Sullivan was visiting here during the summer of 1880 or 1881, he was engaging in an activity he apparently enjoyed more than boxing--drinking heavily and trading stories with the local barflies, in this particular instance at the bar of the old **Avery Hotel**.

According to the *Monitor* account, Sullivan was approached in the Avery bar room by a group of local citizens who told him, "we are representatives of a man who says he can lick you." Sullivan immediately took up the challenge (as, according to his biography, he was often inclined to do in such situations) and the group hurried to **Clemens Park**, formerly the site of the town cemetery. George Roessel, who had established for himself the title of Southeastern Michigan Champion, waited there for Sullivan, and the fight was on.

Roessel landed a heavy blow to the champ's chest, then Sullivan tried unsuccessfully to land an early knock-out punch to end the fight with dispatch. He failed, and Roessel hurled himself into Sullivan, hoping to unbalance the great pugilist. The Boston Strong Boy put his challenger into a head lock, but the local man wriggled free. Sparring went on for several minutes before Sullivan landed the deciding blow to Roessel's jaw. The fight concluded, the entire crowd returned to the Avery's gleaming mahogany bar and the combatants drank to each other's health.

A subsequent item in the *Monitor* indicates that Roessel may have held a bit of a grudge over the incident. The newspaper ran the following item on May 16, 1884:

**George Roessel has made a standing offer of \$25 to Mervine Thompson if he will whip Sullivan. It will be remembered that George had a trifling misunderstanding with Sullivan when the latter was here three years ago, which resulted in the discomfiture of the Mt. Clemens slogger.**

Sullivan never fought a professional purse fight here in Mount Clemens, but he did train here for a number of his 47 bouts. When he failed to visit Mount Clemens in 1892 before his celebrated match with **Jim Corbett**, the *Mount Clemens Monitor* lamented the fact that Sullivan had evidently forgotten that Mount Clemens was responsible for his successes, and boldly predicted that the Great Bostonian was about to lose his title:

**The Only baths cured him of his histrionic weakness and made him the greatest**

**rough-and- tumble actor of his time. If Sullivan don't come here to train, Jim Corbett will swipe him out of pugilistic existence.**

In fact, the only outright defeat of Sullivan's career was his 1892 loss to Jim Corbett by a knock-out. Whether his failure to train in Mount Clemens and partake of the health-giving waters contributed to the loss will fall to the reader to decide.

John L. Sullivan died in Massachusetts on February 2, 1918. The editor of the *Mount Clemens Monitor* duly noted his passing with a reference to the fight with George Roessel, then some 38 years past. The *Monitor* recalled the details somewhat differently, remarking that Sullivan had "licked" Roessel with one blow for accosting a lady, and that the event occurred on Pearl Street. However the details may have been embellished with the passage of time, it is evident that John L. Sullivan earned for himself a place in the pages of Mount Clemens local lore.

For more information about John L. Sullivan's career and his visits to Mount Clemens, we recommend:

- "Old Timers Recall Sullivan's Fight Here: Fought Local Champion in Clemens Park," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, March 1, 1935, p.9, col.3.
- "John L. Sullivan, dead in Massachusetts..." *Mount Clemens Monitor*, February 8, 1918, p.8, col.5.
- "It is said that John L. Sullivan doesn't know where to train..." *Mount Clemens Monitor*, June 10, 1892, p.8, col.3.
- "John L. Sullivan," *Mount Clemens Press*, May 27, 1886, p.1, col.8.
- "The Sun, of Detroit, has just been informed...", *Mount Clemens Press*, March 11, 1886, p.1, col.3.
- "George Roessel has made a standing offer...", *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 16, 1884, p.1, col.4.
- Ward, Geoffrey C. "The Boston Strong Boy," *American Heritage*, v.39, no.6 (Sept/Oct 1988), p.12-14.