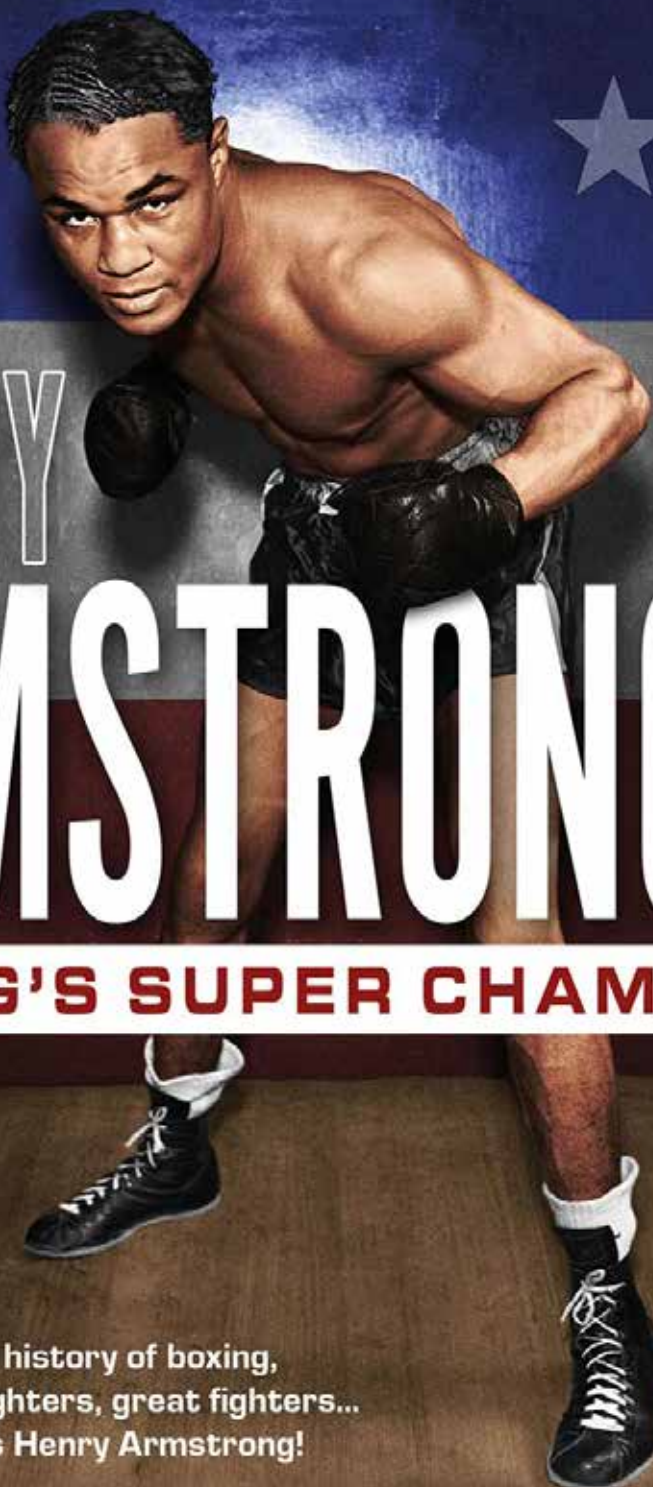


JOHN JARRETT

A photograph of a man, Henry Armstrong, in a boxing stance. He is shirtless, wearing black boxing gloves and black boxing shoes with white socks. He is leaning forward, looking intensely at the camera. The background is a blue wall with two white stars. The text 'HENRY ARMSTRONG' is overlaid on the image in large, bold, white letters.

HENRY
ARMSTRONG

BOXING'S SUPER CHAMP

In the long, storied history of boxing,
there were good fighters, great fighters...
and then there was Henry Armstrong!

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Chapter One

HENRY JACKSON SR., a sharecropper and butcher, married America Armstrong, an Iroquois Indian (some sources say Cherokee). They lived on a plantation owned by the senior Jackson's Irish father, who had married one of his slaves. On 12 December 1912, Henry Jackson Jr., the 11th of the couple's 15 children, was born in Columbus, Mississippi. When the oldest Jackson brother, Ollus, first saw Henry he remarked, 'Gee, Mom, he looks like a little rat!' The mother quickly defended her newest child. 'He may look like a rat now, but some day he'll be the big cheese in this family. Call him a rat if you want to, but he'll win, whatever he does. And some day he'll be a fine preacher.'

Although Henry's mother and grandmother wanted him to become a minister, he had a talent for fighting, a drive to become a champion, and a goal of achieving fame and fortune. In 1938 he became the first boxer in history to hold three world titles simultaneously. Later, in 1951, he became an ordained Baptist minister.

'Father Henry Jackson wasn't just Indian, like his mother; he was of Indian, Irish and Negro stock, a sturdy sort of little man with a stern character and a solid reputation. Working the lifelong day so the new baby and the older ones and Mom

could eat, he didn't have time to celebrate the fact that he'd become a Senior, with a Junior in the cradle in the cabin; he just went on working to feed and clothe and shelter the family in the log-and-shingle house. He was a sharecropper, one of the millions driven mercilessly by that cruel and jealous despot, King Cotton ... Little Rat grew in the midst of cotton fields and the men and women who worked them – not the men and women who owned them.¹

'When Armstrong was a child, to find employment, his father moved the family to a three-room house in St Louis, Missouri, where he worked for the Independent Packing Company. Henry Jackson's hair had come in red and he was known as "Red Jackson." He was small but a fierce brawler in the streets. His fraternal grandmother, Henrietta Chatman, took over the task of disciplining him after his mother's death from consumption in 1918. He was hard to handle, but soon conformed to his grandmother's demands.'²

At Toussaint L'Overture Grammar School in St Louis, his small stature attracted teasing from other children and he found it necessary to defend himself. Discovering that he was good at fighting, he determined to become a boxer. He did not neglect his studies, however, and he earned respect when moving on to Vashon High School.

He made good grades and later was elected class president by his fellow students. At his graduation he read a valedictory poem he had written as poet laureate of his class. Outside school he worked to develop his athletic abilities, often running the eight miles distance from home. After school he

1 Henry Armstrong, *Gloves, Glory and God*, 1957.

2 Barney Nagler, *Ring*, August 1981.

set pins in a bowling alley. By the time he had finished high school, his 60-year-old father was suffering from rheumatism and was rarely able to work a full week. His grandmother, now 80 years old and almost blind, shelled pecans for a local nut factory. Henry realised that it was time he started working for real money. Aged 17, he claimed he was 21 and was hired as a section hand for the Missouri Pacific Railroad at \$20 a week. As he swung the sledgehammer to drive the spikes in, he recalled that Jack Dempsey had built his strength wielding a pick and shovel.

‘One day Henry read in a St Louis newspaper that a favourite fighter of his, Kid Chocolate, had beaten Al Singer at the Polo Grounds in New York City and had earned \$75,000 doing it. That was real money! That was fabulous! Why, you could work a year on the railroad at twenty dollars a week and earn just barely more than \$1,000. And in seventy-five years ... but no, there was just no sensible way of making a comparison. Henry told the man next to him on the handcar that evening about Kid Chocolate’s \$75,000 purse “and some day I’m going to make that much money in the ring,” he concluded.’³

Working on the railroad was hard, but it was building muscle in his upper body, although his legs were those of a younger boy. But running everywhere strengthened them as well as his lungs and they never let him down when he started boxing. By the time he was laid off he had learned how to swing a hammer hard and hit the spike head; he also learned that he could hold his own in hard physical labour. Not much

3 Henry Armstrong, *Gloves, Glory and God*, 1957.

use, however, when he managed to land a new job, working in the Universal Hat Shop in St Louis. He served a year there, learning how to clean and block hats, making deliveries, doing odd jobs. It was a job and he was paid enough to help at home.

Finishing at five every day, he would spend his time in the coloured YMCA on Pine Street. It was there he met Harry Armstrong, a jovial fighter who would watch him working out and they became friends. Harry was training a young lad named Eddie Foster and he asked Henry if he would go a couple of rounds with Eddie. To his surprise, Henry found the other boy easy to handle, and Harry was impressed. He climbed into the ring and squared up to young Jackson. Henry swung and missed, swung and missed, before Harry held up his hand. A few words of encouragement and they were off again. This time Henry managed to hit Harry and the older man dropped to the canvas.

‘Boy, you sure can punch,’ he said, getting to his feet and rubbing his jaw. He was already thinking that this boy was worth training. He heard Henry singing in the shower, and as the lad dressed, he said, ‘That’s it, I’ll call him Melody, Melody Jackson.’ When they parted that evening, Henry sang all the way home. He had a feeling, with Harry he could get somewhere. The journey had already begun!

In January of 1930, the western boxing championships of the Amateur Athletic Union was to be held at the St Louis Coliseum. When Harry suggested it might be a good idea for Henry to enter, the boy lost no time filling out an application form. He was going to be a real boxer! He figured it wouldn’t be a good idea to have anything in his stomach so he didn’t eat all that day of the fight. He remembered reading that

Gene Tunney drank a quart (two pints) of milk during the day before going in the ring. What was good enough for Gene Tunney was good enough for Henry Jackson. He drank a quart of milk!

By seven that evening, with nothing in his stomach but two pints of milk and a sick feeling, he turned up at the Coliseum an hour before they opened the doors. When the doors finally opened, Henry was freezing cold from falling snow and feeling sick and going home seemed a good idea. But he went in to find there was only one black boy entered in the featherweight class, a tough kid named Jimmy Birch. Henry knew of Birch, he was good. He was too good for Henry in the first two rounds – the kid was knocked out standing up but he didn't fall. He even felt better, the sickness leaving him, and he sailed into Birch, throwing his gloves like he didn't want to see them again. Birch was swamped in a sea of leather and when he came to, he was lying on the floor and the referee told him he could go home. Henry Jackson was the featherweight champion of the West!

A local promoter matched the boys again and he got a good crowd at a big hall in Pine Street.

The fight was scheduled for four rounds and the fans loved it. Henry wasn't loving it. By the third he had had enough. His nose was broken, with one eye blackened, lips bleeding, he tore into Birch who was shocked at Jackson's fightback. Birch was due a further shock when Henry knocked him down and out. That was better, son. Harry Armstrong had good news for the winner ... they were going on a trip to Pittsburgh.

After winning his fight, Henry was given a slip supposedly worth five dollars in equipment at the local sporting goods

shop. First lesson in the fight game! Henry and the other winners discovered the slips were worthless. When the boys looked for the promoter, he had skipped town. And when he got home, the family were shocked when they saw their brother's face.

Emma Lou Jackson, his sister-in-law, was no comforter. 'Why don't you stop all this fighting, Henry?' she urged. 'Get these wild notions out of your head. Settle down, become a preacher.'

'I'm not ready to be a preacher yet, Sis Lou,' he answered slowly. 'Some day, maybe ... but just now it looks like it's me for fighting and fighting for me.'⁴

In his third amateur bout in St Louis, Henry knocked out Roy Johnson in two rounds. Next day he went looking for Harry Armstrong. Harry's other young fighter, Eddie Foster, had bought a 1927 model Nash. It needed a new set of tyres among other things but Harry said they would be okay if they took it easy. Next morning they were on the road: Harry, Henry, Eddie and a big police dog, for company and good luck. In Henry's heart was hope, in his pocket, ten dollars. Harry had renamed his troupe of young pugilists: Eddie was 'Mississippi' and Henry was 'Melody' Jackson, with a song in his heart and a sock in his fist. He had won his three fights as an amateur, he was ready for the world!

Unfortunately, the world wasn't quite ready for Mr Jackson. They found a local gym and Henry and Eddie trained hard, trying to impress the local matchmakers and fans, but after five weeks, their dwindling budget almost

⁴ Henry Armstrong, *Gloves, Glory and God*, 1957.

gone, their stomachs beginning to revolt against Harry's daily ration of cabbage, salt pork and whole wheat bread, and no fights!

Just when the boys were thinking of heading back home, Harry got a match for 'Melody' with Jackie Wilson, a good featherweight. Luckily for Jackson, Wilson was injured in training and the matchmaker found a local southpaw, Al Iovino, who had only two bouts but a great amateur record, unfortunately marred by the death of one of his opponents, Leo Mahan. The boys were matched in a four-round bout at Apple Myers Bowl, an open-air arena at North Braddock, about eight miles out of Pittsburgh, on a card topped by Teddy Yarosz and Bucky Lawless.

It was Monday, 27 July 1931, Henry's first pro bout, and he wasn't feeling too good after weeks of Harry's cabbage diet. He didn't feel too good when Iovino's left hooks to the stomach laid him low twice in the second then at two minutes 27 seconds of round three. The kid felt a bit better when they gave him his purse, \$35.

The story behind this fight was revealed years later by Harry Keck, sports editor of the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*. 'I received a letter one day in 1938 from little Jimmy Thomas, a Negro featherweight of Pittsburgh, who was then boxing in California. In it he told me that the great Henry Armstrong was none other than one "Melody Jackson", who had boxed in Pittsburgh seven years before.

'I'm sure of it,' he wrote. 'My manager, Abie Witz, used to pay him a dollar a day to work out with me in the Salvation Army gym in Pittsburgh. You should remember him. Al Iovino knocked him out in the Meyers Bowl.

‘With this information, I approached Iovino who no longer was fighting but was working as a carpenter’s helper. “I thought there was something about the pictures of Armstrong in the newspapers,” said Iovino. “Now that you mention it, I’m sure he’s the same fellow. But the man I fought was named Melody Jackson ... I had trouble getting bouts because I was a southpaw and could hit. All I ever could do was punch!”’

In recalling the bout with Jackson/Armstrong, Iovino said, ‘Melody was deceptive in build. I weighed 123 pounds and he appeared much heavier. He wanted to weigh in in his street clothes, but we made him strip and were surprised when he scaled only 120 pounds. He was all arms and shoulders. He came buzzing after me, boring in from the start, and I let him come, nailing him with lefts to the body and head. He was made to measure for my southpaw counter-punching. He went down twice in the second round from punches to the stomach. The end came in the third from another good one.’

Harry Keck would later recall, ‘I caught up with Henry before one of his championship bouts in New York and asked him for an explanation. At first, he denied that he had ever boxed Iovino, but finally admitted it. He said the reason he had kept the bout a hidden chapter in his career was that he would have lost his amateur status had it been known that he fought as a professional. On returning to St Louis he resumed as an amateur under his own name until he went on to Los Angeles, where he got his first real break.’⁵

5 Harry Keck, *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, August 1965, *Boxing Illustrated*.

Four days later, with a couple of steaks under his belt, Melody Jackson was in action again, facing Sammy Burns over six rounds at Hickey Park in Milville, just outside Pittsburgh. At the bell he sailed into Burns to floor him three times and finish with the decision. Another \$35 purse put a smile on his face and he looked around for another bout. Harry was offered several opponents, but the names sounded like Eddie Shea and Benny Bass. Not yet son. The boys decided to go back home and set off for Chicago the next morning where Eddie had a brother.

Staying for a week, they took in Johnny Coulon's gym. Henry was nursing a swollen finger so there was no ring work. They watched fighters like Eddie Shea in another local gym, along with a young fellow named Barney Ross, a guy he would meet one day in his future. Right now they were headed home to St Louis, somewhat downhearted and dejected. But Henry was still filled with a bright future waiting for him out there somewhere. A few days later he called Harry; he had made his mind up. It was California or bust!

He had heard from Harry Armstrong how well the little fellows were doing on the west coast. Speedy Dado, for instance. Why, Dado was drawing super-gates that netted him as much as \$5,000 every two weeks! And on the ceiling, over Henry's staring eyes as he lay in bed dreaming, appeared a vision of Speedy Dado, just as he had looked on the cover of a recent issue of *Knockout*, the boxing magazine – smiling, dressed in elegant, expensive clothes. A large diamond ring flashed insistently on one hand ... oranges falling like manna from heaven ... luscious nights under the star-studded sky-blue dome of heaven ... \$5,000 purses ... classy clothes and a

diamond ring ... these blended alluringly before Henry as he lay there envisioning the California life to come. Then reality barged in for a moment. How to get there? He was broke. Harry was broke. Eddie was broke.⁶

‘That trip to California is still one of the nightmares of Henry Armstrong’s life,’ wrote Nat Fleischer in 1938. ‘His face becomes serious and slightly sinister when he speaks of the jungle camps from which they were chased by the other hoboes, the railroad police, the days without food and the many privations of life on the road to which they were subjected. However, he reached California with that indomitable will, more steeled than ever, his spirit burning with that irresistible driving force.’⁷

Finally, as the freight approached Colton, California, they were put off the train at the city limits. They asked other hoboes about getting to Los Angeles and were advised to hitch-hike on the highway rather than try another train.

It was good advice and they were soon perched on a load of sand heading for the city. The driver told them of Central Avenue, the main street of the ‘black’ area of Los Angeles. He advised them of the best hotel in town, the Dunbar, and dropped them there. But when the boys eyed the men and women inside, visible from the doorway, then looked at themselves, they shrugged and walked away, looking for Central Avenue. As they walked along in the rain, they met an old fighter named Eagle Thomas who gave them each 25 cents and directed them to the Midnight Mission where they could get a bed for the night.

6 Henry Armstrong, *Gloves, Glory and God*, 1957.

7 Nat Fleischer, *Black Dynamite Vol. II*, 1938.

‘For the next few days the boys haunted the gyms in Los Angeles – the Main Street, the Manhattan and the Ringside. Unable to get in because of the admission charge, they stood on the kerb and hoped. At this juncture of Henry’s career, along came Leroy Haynes, who was to be cast in the role of Good Samaritan. Large Leroy, himself no stranger to the trials and tribulations of the black boxer, lent a sympathetic ear to the little fellow’s plea. Not only did Leroy afford the boys entrance to the gym, but he also made an effort to get a manager for Henry. He dug up one Paddy Quaid as a prospective mentor. After watching the stranger work, Quaid declared that he couldn’t be bothered with what he called ‘just another fighter’.

The boys had better luck with the second prospect, Tom Cox, who promoted ‘bootleg boxing’ shows. After watching Henry make short work of a spar-mate in two rounds, Cox wasted no time in reaching for his fountain pen and extending Armstrong a long-term contract.⁸

As Harry weighed up the offer to Henry, he made the boy sign his name as Armstrong and not Jackson in case of possible complications that might void the contract. When Cox came up with a \$5 advance, the contract was signed and Henry Armstrong was a professional fighter. ‘Forget Melody Jackson,’ said Harry. ‘From now on you’re my brother, Henry Armstrong!’

The fighter later claimed that, during his first year as an amateur in Los Angeles, he had between 85 and 90 fights and won all of them. A more plausible accounting is that he won 58 of 62 amateur fights, earning a few dollars on the side for

⁸ Nat Fleischer, *Black Dynamite Vol II*, 1938.

each fight. He shined shoes to make ends meet. In summer 1932, 'Henry Armstrong' competed for a spot on the United States Olympic Team but was eliminated in the trials.⁹

On the journey back to Los Angeles, Harry and Henry made their minds up. No more amateur boxing, the kid was becoming a professional fighter – for the second time.

Cox was around the gyms looking for a buyer for Henry's contract. He found Wirt Ross, the guy they called 'One-Shot'. Ross paid \$250 for Henry's contract. 'Report to him at the Main Street gym,' Cox told the boys. 'He's taking over from there on. Good luck.'

⁹ Thomas Hauser, *TopRank.com*, 2011.