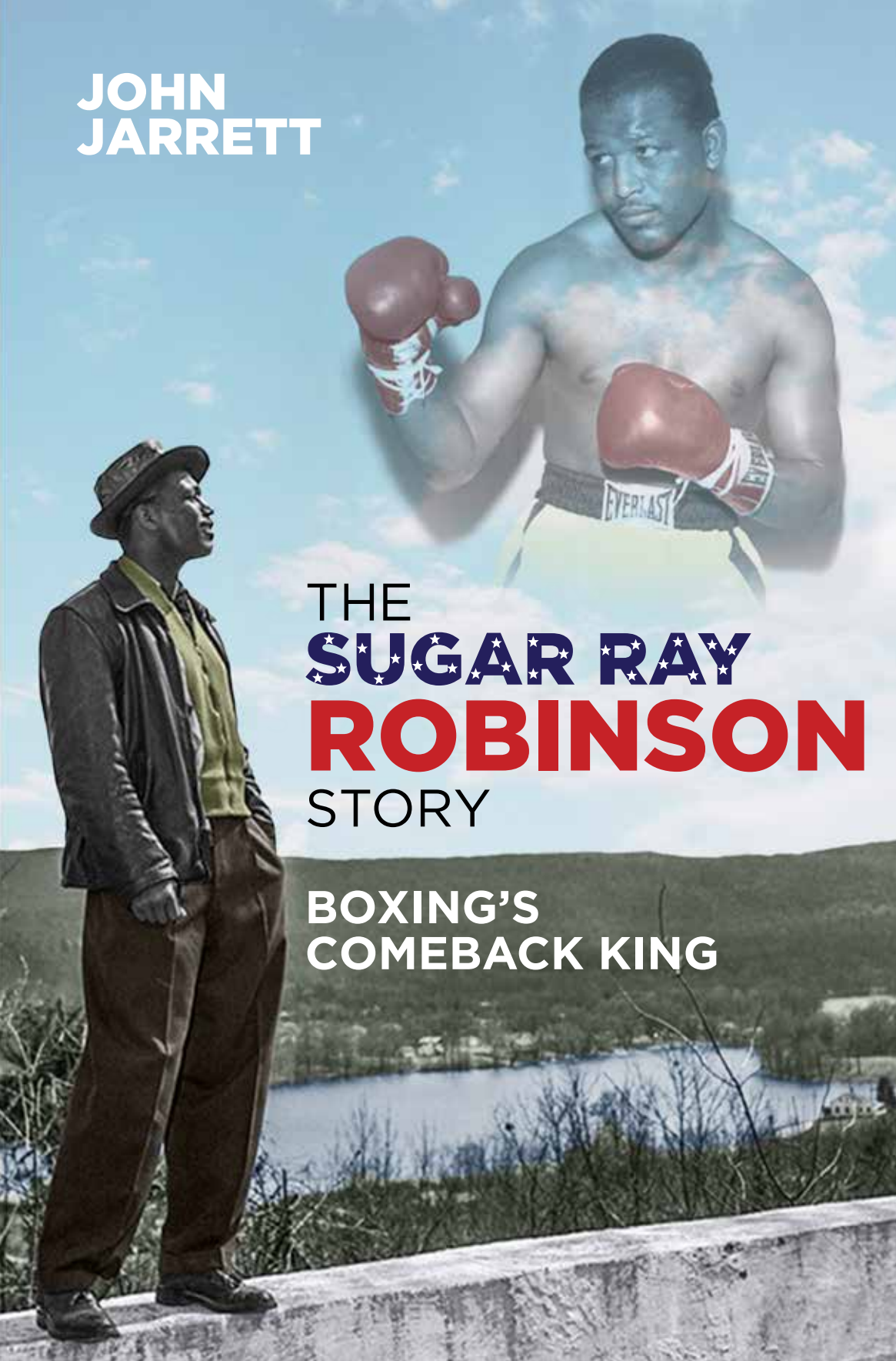
JOHN
JARRETT
THE
SUGAR RAY
ROBINSON
STORY
BOXING'S
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THE SUGAR RAY ROBINSON STORY

BOXING'S COMEBACK KING

JOHN JARRETT

pitch

CONTENTS

1
IN THE BEGINNING

AILEY IS a city in Montgomery County, Georgia, USA. According to the US Census Bureau, the city has a total area of two square miles.

In the 1920 census, the population numbered 385. Under Notable Persons are the names of Hugh Peterson, lawyer, and Sugar Ray Robinson, boxer. Ailey's claim to be the birthplace of Robinson is somewhat tenuous at best. Of nine sources, three list Ailey as Robinson's birthplace and six Detroit. There are seven birthdates in 1921 and two in 1920.

In his 2007 book *Being Sugar Ray,* author Kenneth Shropshire wrote, 'When Sugar Ray was born 3 May 1921 [that is the most consistent birthdate cited] the Smith family already had two girls, but many of the details of his early life are speculative. We can't be sure when or where he was born. To some extent, that is the way Robinson chose to live his life. Spinning a yarn, holding back on details, telling the story the audience wanted to hear – that was part of his genesis legend. It is also possible that he simply did not know.

'In his autobiography [ghostwritten by Dave Anderson] he says that he travelled to Detroit from Ailey, Georgia in his mother's womb. That certainly makes for a more compelling account about where his life began. In fact, many traditional explanations have him born in Detroit. Robinson's birth certificate says that he was

born in Ailey in 1921.'[1] Walker Smith had grown up on a farm just outside Dublin, Georgia. He married a local girl, Leila Hurst, who had worked on a farm, and together they raised cotton, corn and peanuts, and children. Marie was born in 1917, followed by Evelyn two years later. Leila's sister and her husband lived in Detroit and they wrote back telling of plenty of good paying jobs. That sounded good to Walker Smith and he decided to go to Detroit, get a job and send for Leila and the children when he had saved enough money. Working on a construction site, he was soon making $60 a week and was able to send for Leila and the girls to join him.

'Pop had rented the first floor of a wooden frame house on McComb Street in Detroit's Black Bottom section,' Robinson would recall. 'It was Black because we lived there, Bottom because that's where we were at. That's where I was born on 3 May 1921. No hospital for me. No doctor, either. I arrived in Mom's bed with a midwife officiating at my first weigh-in. Seven pounds, 12 ounces. When Pop got home that night, he had my name picked out. "Junior," he told Mom. "My first boy baby has got to be a junior." Walker Smith, Junior. No middle name. Pop always called me Junior. Nobody ever called me Walker.'[2]

Walker Smith worked hard and he played hard. A sharp dresser, he liked a drink or two and Leila would argue with him about spending money. Junior was almost six when his mother packed him and his sisters on a train headed back to Georgia, to her mother's farm at Glenwood. Pop wasn't with them because Leila hadn't told him they were leaving. She returned to Detroit, where she worked at a big hotel. About a year later, Leila was back in Georgia. She wanted a divorce but she had to have the children living with her, so she went back to her mother's farm, gathered up her brood and headed back to Detroit.

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1 Kenneth Shropshire *Being Sugar Ray* 2007

2 Sugar Ray Robinson with Dave Anderson *Sugar Ray* 1969

Junior had loved being on the farm, but now he was back in the city, back in Black Bottom, and it still looked black. Leila had a new job as a seamstress and she worried about Junior getting into trouble with the street gangs. Actually, the kid had started hanging around the Brewster Centre, which pleased his mother and she would give him the 25 cents, the monthly dues, which she really couldn't afford. Walker Smith Jr was taking his first steps on the road to fame and fortune.

Located at 637 Brewster Street, between St Antoines and Hastings, the two-storey red-brick building was Detroit's first community centre for blacks, opening in October 1929. Every day the basement gym was jammed with young men skipping, sparring, hitting punch bags of all size and weight, watched by older men chewing unlit cigars, a dirty towel slung around their neck, shouting rough instructions to their favourite fighter. Becoming one of the favourites was a husky young fellow named Joe Louis Barrow. Joe was a particular favourite of Walker Smith Jr. Joe couldn't get rid of the kid. He would follow Joe to the gym, tagging along behind the big fellow, and if Joe let him carry his gym bag, Junior was walking ten feet tall. He broke his heart when Joe, at that time a 17-year-old middleweight, took a whipping in his first amateur fight from Johnny Miler, a more experienced light-heavyweight who dropped Joe seven times and took the decision. Joseph Louis Barrow would later become Joe Louis, possibly the greatest heavyweight champion of all time.

Shortly after that, in early 1932, Leila loaded her family on to a bus headed for New York City. In her handbag was a letter she had received, with the address of a three-room flat. 'Four-nineteen West Fifty-third Street, that's near Times Square,' she told the kids. After paying the rent, she had exactly 40 cents left in her purse. That same day, dusting the shelves in her new home, she found 35 cents. With the 40 she already had, it was enough for supper that first night in New York.

'Leila Smith had been a field hand in the South,' wrote Wil Haygood in his 2009 biography of Robinson. 'She did not have a

fragile psyche: she was coarse and blunt and aggressive with her language. She argued with grocery store clerks over bills and she argued with rent collectors. When little Walker seemed to need a hug, he often received more tough words from his mother, stinging language about standing up, about pride. Economic miseries were everywhere. In 1932, millions of Americans were losing jobs by the month. Wages were down 40 per cent compared to just three years earlier. Impoverished children were especially vulnerable. Little Walker Smith, who always seemed to be hungry, took free lunches at the local Salvation Army – "hot dogs and beans," he would sadly remember.'[3]

Junior was 13 years old and weighed about 85 pounds when he hammered some kid called Shake. When his sister's boyfriend pulled him off, the other kid's blood was all over the sidewalk and Junior felt pretty good about himself. He felt better a couple of days later when a little guy named Benny Booksinger stopped him in the street and said he had heard about him fighting and would like him to box on one of his amateur bills for the Police Athletic League. Junior beat a boy called Harmon over three rounds and was ready to fight the kid's big brother when his mother stepped in and chased him home and chased Benny Booksinger off the street.

'But Benny liked what he saw of young Smitty and kept matching him on his cards around the city. He won most of them but a tough little Irish kid beat him over three rounds one night. Years later, Billy Graham would remind Junior of that fight. "You know who the kid was?" he asked the fighter who had become Sugar Ray Robinson. "I never saw him again," said Ray. "You're looking at him now," said Graham, who had become a top welterweight contender. "Before the fight all the kids thought you were Joe Louis's nephew, because you had known him from Detroit. I was scared stiff." "You didn't fight like it," said Robinson.[4]

3 Wil Haygood *Sweet Thunder: The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson* 2009

4 Sugar Ray Robinson with Dave Anderson *Sugar Ray* 1969

When young Walker Smith Jr was a pupil at Cooper Junior High School, a boy in his class named Warren Jones, an amateur boxer, told him his uncle was a trainer at the Salem-Crescent gym, which was in the basement of the Salem Methodist Church at 129th Street and Seventh Avenue. Leila Smith and her family were now living in Harlem, and one thing she noticed in her new community was the number of churches. Now it looked as though the church was going to save her son from the dangers of this new concrete jungle. 'Now he found himself in a neighbourhood rough at the best of times and now battered by the Depression, a place that could gobble him up, but he wouldn't let it. That descent into a church basement offered a kind of clarity he had never felt before. The boy – whose independent mind seems to have sprung directly from his strong-willed mother – could not allow a moment's worth of fear down where the fists were flying. The officials explained to him what was expected of a member of the Salem-Crescent Athletic Club, the name the young pugilists fought under. He told his mother about Salem-Crescent and its vaunted boxing programme. He wanted to join and his enthusiasm filled Leila Smith with joy. He would fight, just as she had long told him to, just as she herself did whenever she had to. She delighted in knowing that her son would have authority figures watching over him and teaching him, a mission his own father had abandoned.'[5]

One of the figures watching over Junior was George Gainford, who was big in amateur boxing around New York City. Gainford was big anywhere, standing over 6ft tall and packing 250 pounds on that frame. Junior's friend, Warren Jones, took him to the Salem-Crescent gym one night and introduced him to his Uncle George. George was not impressed. 'Smitty,' he said, 'What do you weigh?' Smitty answered, 'Hundred and eleven.' 'And how old are you?' 'Fifteen last month.' 'I need another flyweight,' Gainford said. 'Come back tomorrow and I'll take a look at you.'

5 Wil Haygood *Sweet Thunder: The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson* 2009

'But after seeing the kid work out, Gainford realised there was a spark in the boy that could be fanned into possible greatness. So the big-hearted coach dug down in his own pocket and came up with $25 which he handed to the boy for equipment. "Take this money, Junior, and get yourself trunks, shoes, socks and a pair of punching bag gloves. Report back here tomorrow. We're going to work."

'A week later, there was still no sign of the boy, who had taken the money and happily dashed away. Gainford was more than slightly put out. He went looking for his protégé, found him, and dragged him back to the gym. Stern questioning revealed that the kid had spent the money. Fortunately for the future champion, Gainford forgave him; but to punish him, he made Smitty work out in his underwear shorts for a few days before buying him the necessary equipment. He continued to make Junior work – and work hard. Gainford knew how to make a boxer out of promising raw material.'[6]

'At first he didn't look like much fighter,' Gainford recalled. 'All he did was hit and run, but he had one thing. He wanted to learn. He was the first kid in the gym and the last to leave.'

Gainford had a problem with Walker Smith Jr. As the weeks went by, he could see the improvement in the boy and it excited him, but in the back of his mind were the words of Leila Smith. She had come to the gym one night and told him in no uncertain terms was he to make a fighter out of her son. She didn't mind Junior coming to the gym, it was keeping him off the streets. Just so long as he didn't fight. So Junior would go with the lads George was taking to fight in various tournaments and he was happy doing that. He would sit and watch the fights and tell Gainford afterwards, 'I could have beaten some of those kids in there tonight, no trouble.' And big George knew he was right.

One night in Kingston, New York, Junior's dream came true. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) organiser asked Gainford

6 Gene Schoor *Sugar Ray Robinson* 1951

if he had a flyweight in his pocket as he was short of a bout. Gainford said he didn't have a flyweight on the team, but then Junior 'reminded' him. 'Put me in,' he pleaded. The trainer thought for a moment, then called the guy back, telling him he had a flyweight ready to fight. Junior didn't have an AAU card but Gainford quickly rifled through a handful of cards he always carried with him and held one out, 'This is Ray Robinson, here.' he said. 'This is his card.'

'Minutes later, he found himself in the ring, surrounded by noise and lights and the whispering which suddenly seemed loud and George Gainford standing over him and his Salem-Crescent mates cheering him on. "As scared as I was," he would recall, "I was happy." He swung; some of his punches were wild, but more often than not he connected. Gainford yelled from the corner; his boxing mates yelled; the lights got in his eyes, but he moved about the ring with a quickness that surprised even Gainford. He was antsy between rounds, like someone who had been wound up. In the third round, he let loose with a barrage of jabs that excited the gathered boxing fans. The judge had seen enough; "Robinson" was declared, at the end of the third, a unanimous winner. Gainford was happily surprised, grabbing his fighter, wrapping a towel around his neck, grinning wide.

'It is that first amateur victory that the prizefighter remembers with nostalgic rapture. He had done something solid and enviable with his hands; he was flush with talent and knew it. He did not know exactly how he had done it for his fists had been flying so fast. That was the magic and sweetness of it. It was almost beyond explanation. For years and years afterwards, Robinson would regale writers with the story of this fight in Kingston, as if it were the beginning of his realisation of being on earth.'[7]

That was how Walker Smith Jr became Ray Robinson. He would use the name from that time on. 'I knew the real Ray Robinson,' recalled Ray, 'and in the years that followed he liked

7 Wil Haygood *Sweet Thunder:The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson* 2009

to tease me that I'd stolen his name. I couldn't argue with him. The last time I saw him, he was a bartender.' After that, the new Ray Robinson fought all around the bootleg circuit. The bouts were supposed to be amateur. The boxers would get a watch, then the guy would buy it back and give them $10. There were bouts for him in Waterbury, Danbury, New Haven, Hartford, Bridgeport, sometimes he fought three times in a week, and loved it.

'I don't know how many bootleg fights I had,' he said. 'Maybe a couple of hundred. We got maybe $10 if we won, maybe eight if we lost. Ray didn't lose. George Gainford would add, "I made a living with them fights during the Depression."'

'We used to fight out of Norwich, Connecticut,' Willie Pep recalled, 'sometimes at this place called DU-WELL A.C. I always got a kick out of that. I was amateur flyweight champion of Connecticut at the time and we used to fight the Salem-Crescent A.C. from Harlem, New York. Black kids who could really fight. Anyway, I saw this real tall kid come in and when I said to my manager, "Who's that?" he said, "That's the guy you're gonna fight." I said, "Be serious, look at that guy." You see, at that time I was a flyweight. I weighed about 105 pounds, and this guy was about 128, a featherweight. So Buster said, "Don't worry, don't worry. He can't be any good fighting you."

'Well, I fight this guy and he's all over me. He's too good. Too big. He's punching me and punching me and I'm just trying to hang in there. When it ended and the guy won, I heard his name was Ray Roberts. Later on I find out that, too, is a phoney name because he was really Ray Robinson. Since Ray, who fought his amateur career under his real name, Walker Smith, was amateur, he couldn't pick up any money in New York, and he came to Connecticut, where amateurs were allowed to fight for money. This was in 1938.'[8]

Robinson would remember that fight. 'I was with George in Hartford, Connecticut. The promoter there had George bring

8 *Friday's Heroes* Willie Pep with Robert Sacchi 1973

me up to fight this kid who was unbeaten. I got the decision, a close one. It broke his winning streak. But he was some fighter, a little Italian kid. "What's his name again?" I asked somebody after the fight. "Willie Papaleo," he said, "but around here, Willie Pep." In later years, Willie Pep would win the world featherweight championship, and he was the best boxer I ever saw. After that victory, I was getting dressed when a Hartford policeman marched in with one of the local amateur boxing officials.

"Gainford," the cop said, "you and your fighter better come with me. Some of the people around here think your fighter has to be a pro if he beat Willie Pep here. I'm going to have to lock you both up for the night until the people here can check with the AAU in NewYork in the morning." George exploded but it didn't do any good. We went to jail. Next morning, the Hartford promoter checked with Ben Levine, the AAU boxing man in New York, and he vouched for my amateur standing.'[9]

The night of 5 January 1939 was a significant one in the career of Ray Robinson. He was in the little town of Watertown in upstate New York, about 30 miles from the Canadian border, leading the Salem-Crescent team into battle. Ray's opponent was a tough brawler, Dom Perfetti, an Eastern States champion. Scheduled for five rounds, it was all action from the opening bell with Robinson going at top speed, outboxing and outpunching the bantamweight. It was over in the fifth, the champion beaten, and Gainford was in the ring wrapping a towel around his neck. Watching from the press row was Jack Case, sports editor of *The Watertown Times.* As Ray came down from the ring with big George behind him, Case told George, 'That's a sweet fighter you've got there, a real sweet fighter.'

A woman spectator heard Case, and smiled. "Sweet as sugar," she said. Next morning, Ray would read Case's report. 'Sugar Robinson, clever little New York mittman, proved to be everything his nickname implied at the Starbeck Avenue arena Wednesday

9 Sugar Ray Robinson with Dave Anderson *Sugar Ray* 1969

night where he boxed his way to a five-round decision over Dom Perfetti, Eastern States champion.'

A boxing legend was born that night. Sugar Ray Robinson. 'It rolled almost liltingly from the lips, as if the three names were a stitched-together appellation of something elegant and athletic,' wrote Wil Haygood in his book. 'He said the name to himself over and over again. He was his own man now. The kid in the mirror, the kid who had tramped along the streets in Black Bottom in Detroit, the kid who had sat staring out over Manhattan's East River wondering about his fate, began to feel as if he had reinvented himself. The name was his now and it made him smile when he heard it uttered. "Walker Smith Jr was a forgotten man," the young fighter would declare.'[10]

10 Wil Haygood *Sweet Thunder: The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson* 2009